In the summer of 2012 I drove approximately six thousand miles in a camper van through America. The journey started in Los Angeles and reached its most northerly point in Vancouver Island after six weeks. Of forty-two nights on the road only eight were spent in cities. I travelled with a close friend Jon Harris, a filmmaker and photographer. The reason for the trip was personal, to challenge myself in an environment I had never previously experienced and to explore a country which I was aware had indirectly influenced my life in many ways. The aims were simple: To be away from a routine, timetables, laptops, iPhones - to live differently, or rather to live the way we truly wanted to for a while. Along our journey I kept a journal, and this memoir of the trip is constructed around selected important entries with explanatory notes.
Nothing can quite describe the feeling of nervous excitement at the prospect of discovery that overwhelms you after touching down in a busy LAX airport and heading to the suburbs of the city to sign for a van that will be your home for the next six weeks. The office was pokey and dingy, perched next to a roadside and industrial park in the suburb of Compton. After conquering a six-lane Los Angeles highway to escape the city, we finally realised this once far off dream had become a reality. Our first night on the road was spent on a Californian beach where, both tired and disorientated, we found a quiet spot to gather ourselves away from L.A. As I fell asleep that night, I thought of all those who had influenced my life that called America their home; countless musicians, writers, actors, inventors and leaders. I wanted to see the country that had influenced them, and to get to know it for myself. I didn’t know what to expect, but could have never predicted the scale of what we achieved in the six weeks that followed.
‘Camped out in the fields of a farm last night, built a fire and watched the twilight come in… Mist came up on us in the morning and we drove out of the farm, past puzzled Mexicans starting their day. I await six weeks of spontaneity and adventure to come.’

I came to the state of California with a warped perception constructed by images that films and television had impressed upon me. Before the trip I imagined beaches with roller skaters on boardwalks, sunset boulevards, highways, surfers and sun-seekers. I did glimpse these things, but wasn’t subject to them daily. In fact, our introduction started and continued on a different note. On our second night we camped in the foothills of Santa Barbara in the fields of a farm discovered by following a roadside track. We built a fire and stared into the twilight. All was still. After the rush of our arrival in Los Angeles it was hard to believe how quickly we had found in such a rural and peaceful place. By morning we were moving on, packing up the van for the first of many times. We sped past some Mexican workers turning up for days work at first light. Though the pitch of the first night was ideal, this did not continue. California's ranches are closely guarded with high fences and warning signs designed to intimidate their readers. We quickly realized that simply turning up in van expecting to sleep on someone's land was not polite or even safe. California has a wealth of natural beauty on its rugged coastline and inland in its vineyard-strewn fields, but I found a sense of intense and occasionally menacing privacy shrouding the beauty. Though attitudes were friendly, personal space was rarely shared. The reason for this became clearer as the journey continued.

The Big Sur route of Highway 1, the Napa Valley wine region and the Redwood forests demonstrated why California has the reputation it does. Driving the van down the Pacific coast, sighting grey whales that swim north up to Canada in the summer months, was when the adventure really hit me. We were following their direction, and dared to dream of a meeting later in the trip. In Big Sur National Park, we hiked for two days and camped out in the forest to find natural hot springs, a tip we had picked up from a girl called Halle in a bar in Morro Bay. This became a common occurrence on the trip, changing tact based on local recommendations. I was never comfortable taking the Lonely Planet’s word as gospel as I increasingly found that dull small-town strips were sugarcoated in their descriptions. However, more than anything it maintained the spontaneity of everyday life and encouraged us to be adventurous. The darker sides of California’s thick forests and shady run down towns, with bars, old timers and young curious country kids came to a dizzy head when we arrived in Guernsville, a small town on the edge of San Francisco. After a few strange encounters as we attempted to camp by a creek, a local boy warned us about ‘meth heads’ roaming the woods around the area. People are very serious about their property there and we decided to escape in haste back on the road to San Francisco. As we sped through the dark night, the woods wrapped around us and the tension culminated. A strange figure stumbled into the road before the van, he face was contorted and wide-eyed, this man epitomized the types that even locals avoid in the area. The meth problems in California were only, again, quick glimpses, but they were the most disturbing drug-related images I’ve seen in my life. Aside from this
blip, California relieved me in its natural beauty and friendliness. This typical and sometimes overt friendliness taught us to open up and this in turn aided us on the rest of our trip. It was an important feature of traveling in America- to teach oneself to lose those premonitions about strangers that we carry everyday in London and to generally loosen up. We arrived in San Francisco for a whirlwind one night stay spent in a friend's loft apartment in the Haight district. Looking out upon the San Francisco night from an open window provided a welcome contrast from the forests and fields. It was over before it had begun, but our afternoon wanderings in San Francisco left an impression of a thriving city and artistic scene, one that I definitely intend on returning to.

“3rd July 2012 - Eagle Creek - Columbia River Gorge.

Arrived at Eagle Creek this morning, it’s all opened up before us, the wild is greater here than California. Above the roar of the river I swear I can here rumbles of large animals, even the trees breathing. We continue to make our way north through this country, the
... crown of the Cascades await us to the North... I sign off under the stars, the company of the river’s constancy beside me.”

Heading north into Oregon we stumbled upon the desert canyons of Smith Rock, a climbing paradise. Hanging lines of washing between gaunt desert trees in searing heat, we were surrounded by climbing enthusiasts who lived out in this national park most of the summer. After a mix of 4.30am exploration hikes, camping with rattles snakes and eagles above, talking to ex-Navy rangers about local history and famous bars, our confidence began to grow. We continued North to the renowned Columbia River Gorge. Its landscape is composed of the most breathtaking river systems. Waterfalls cascade out of cliffs, spray covering your face as your stare in awe at its form. The further north we headed, the wilder our surroundings became, and in turn we became more experienced in living outdoors. Hiking out for three days requires food, fuel and clothes and after eight hours walking probably the last thing you want to do is scale banks of thick undergrowth for wood in dense forest. However, with night closing in and the temperature beginning to drop you have little option. My hands became accustomed to scratches, cuts and burns - but I relished it as part of the challenge. What is more, in a situation of two people, the last thing to do is complain. You both run on the same amounts of energy and it’s likely that when you’re tired, the other is too. Mentioning it would elevate the feeling and make things that little bit more difficult. Jon and I had travelled before, namely last summer in the Norwegian Lofoten Islands, so we felt confident in our selves and each other’s abilities. Oregon’s forests could be explored for days and its rivers followed for even longer, it was our introduction to America’s northern wildernesses that intensified as we reached Washington State.
6th - 9th July 2012 - Seattle, WA

“This city's karma has gifted us a dose of goodness, we have found comfort in a place that is comfortable in itself. Last night we watched the cityscape lights from Gasworks, with the moon hanging to my left I saw silhouettes of others on the mound, the space needle and the skyline before me. We walk in the dusty haze of Seattle's first weekend of summer, lit by an evening glow on the harbour where neon signs light their statements against the sky. All over town there is coffee and conversation. We have paddled under bridges of the interstate, past houseboats and out into the bay to celebrate Jon's birthday in a city that has impressed us beyond any thus far.”

In states such as Oregon or Washington, it is impossible to escape the shadow of the mountains, or the sounds of the river, or the smells of the evergreens. Wherever you go, even in the heart of Seattle, the Olympic mountain range and particularly Mount Rainier, looms above you. Grabbing a midnight (yes, midnight) cappuccino and slice of banana cake, with Death Cab humming away in the background in the University District we met our first ‘Seattleite’: I casually ask the barista what he’s up to in the city. He is a man mountain, called Josh, friendly as you could hope for and willing to share stories about climbing spots in Smith Rock, Washington and Vancouver Island. He reveals he’s working as part of a government-funded plan in Seattle's leading ecology centre. His job
is to tracks orcas, observe marine habitats and analyze weather patterns. It is incredibly humbling to see a person’s zest for life, success in it and yet their shear friendliness in conversation. Our main host in Seattle, Alexandre Ulmke was a friend of a friend, and truly underlined this attitude of active giving and openness to us. On arriving in the city we expected many things, but could never have dreamed of the hospitality she showed us. A tour of Washington State University’s campus by night that culminated in a cityscape view from the secret spot Gasworks demonstrated this. She taught me what it should be to host anyone in a city. On our final night we drove out to Seattle’s beaches to sip a beer and say our goodbyes before we headed on to Canada. Life on the road can feel daunting at times, but as stereotyped as it sounds, friendly interactions with other people are the key to survival on it. They give you the best memories, but more importantly a reason to go back. Seattle left a great impression on us as our expectancies of the city were fulfilled and exceeded. The city thrives off art and a youth culture and figured like a mythical landscape in which some of my most admired musicians were born. Married with its location on the coast and age-old local knowledge of the breathtaking backcountry that surrounds it, an equilibrium is struck between city and country that I have never witnessed elsewhere. As I drove toward Vancouver Island on our final morning, leaving Seattle to I felt like I was leaving a home from home.
‘16th - 19th July - Vancouver Island, Canada

‘Strathcona National Park: Thick forest and mud, we clap and make noise to scare bears away. I went down to the river at night to fill up our water, turned to observe the silhouettes of black pines against the sky. Everything was completely still, the silence swayed through the trees, cutting across the water, now we have truly found the wild.’

The next and final stage of the six-week odyssey came in our visit to Vancouver Island. This was the biggest test of the trip thus far and the most wild by some stretch. Having driven up the pacific coast from Seattle on a grey morning, the road rolling thick mist out in front of our eyes, I felt like I was in a rhythm. Seattle was the refreshment we needed before Vancouver Island. Our ferry left the small town of Anacortes in the late morning after a long drive timed to perfection as we arrived on the dot for departure. As we headed out onto the straights surrounding the San Juan Islands on our way to the capital Victoria, we speculated about the chances of catching sight of wild orca whales in this
notorious part of the world for them. Little did we know how lucky we would be and the circumstances that this experience would play out in. In Victoria we reconvened and planned our route, the problem facing us in Vancouver Island was the nature of the roads and their directions. It isn't simply a question of turning left and heading west, the roads are unaccommodating and the landscapes much harsher in comparison to what we had experienced before. Nevertheless, Jon celebrated his twenty-second birthday on a remote beach of the West Coast Trail in Vancouver Island a day later. We sat up by the fire, drinking and talking whilst out ahead of us was the Pacific Ocean and Japan. Writing this entry I realize how vast that distance is and how impressive it was that we didn't flinch in getting to the West Coast of Vancouver Island.

The next day we headed north to Lake Cowichan and camped by its vast mass of water which ranged to a thousand feet in depth and colder than anything I'd swum in before. Mornings and evenings by that lake were something very special. Our fire building skills had been refined to a level of advanced and our ability to set up and pack down getting more efficient. A bizarre experience included kayaking out into the lake to stumble upon a chateau like holiday home that had been built in its wilderness. A kind couple offered us cookies and beer, we chatted about the logging industry and its surprising lucrative rewards- one of their sons had paid for college after a couple of summers work planting trees up in the mountains. As we rowed away from the island, the man called after us "Hurley and Harris - the great explorers!"- it was at that moment I believed we had earned the title.

We headed north again, this time to Strathcona National Park. Money was very scarce at this point and paid camping sites were no longer an option. It was either roadside or lakeside, so we tried our upmost to find great pitches. Rolling up by a lake in the Strathcona National Park was a welcome sight and turned out to be the most homely spot of the trip. We camped next to Vancouver Island locals who were regular hunters in 'The Interior' of Canada itself. We exchanged stories at night, but theirs dwarfed ours. One included being surrounded by a pack of wolves with one bullet; the male wolf walked out to investigate the man and was shot dead. At that moment his hopes rested on a lack of courage in the pack, and on that occasion they retreated. Nevertheless, I could sense their great admiration for the distances we had covered from Los Angeles and across the globe in general.

That week we hiked up into Strathcona for two nights, bears were commonplace at this time of year and it was unusual that we didn't manage to see one. Camped up in the mountains approximately one hundred miles from phone signal and at least twenty miles from the nearest human, one feels more vulnerable than usual. This struck me when I went to collect water from a nearby river one evening, walking down through the undergrowth to the water, with a head torch lighting my way I clapped and whistled to warn any potential bears I was there. It is the black bear that roams in Strathcona. In the darkness all I could see were the rocks where I balanced my feet and water that ran into my bottle. Above the sky was a mass of blue; a sling of stars was thrown out above the black peaks of the trees that lead down the valley. It was a humbling moment. However, it heightened my awareness of where I was and the power of nature in the area. A real moment on the trip came that night when I woke with my heart thumping and adrenaline
 coursing through my veins. I had no idea why I was awake; it wasn't yet the hours of cold
dew settling in, I was comfortable in my sleeping bag… But then I smelt the air. A thick
smell of wet fur filled the tent. Without thinking I woke Jon to tell him what I thought I
could smell. Perhaps we had cooked too close to the tent. Perhaps our food wasn't hung
high enough or far enough away from where we slept. Whatever our mistake had been, in
that moment I felt helpless. I lay listening to the night for hours unable to sleep. It is
amazing how acute the senses of the mind are at key moments. I had woken myself in a
rush of adrenaline, prepared for something without even knowing what it was. With a
barrier of paper-think polyester between you and whatever is outside, there is little
protection from any predator or investigating animal. However, we made it to morning
and all was well again. We hiked to the top where we met some Belgian musicians and
we gave them a lift back to the civilization of a local lodge that night where we ate
burgers and drank beer.

It felt good to be back with humans in a safe place though I didn't for one second regret
the experience of Strathcona. It would be belittled by the incredible stories I heard from
hunters of the Canadian interior by the lake we slept on the first night. However, to me, it
was a moment that I will never forget. It is useful to realise how small we are in
comparison to the magnitude of what is out there. This most intense experience of nature
came at our most northerly point and toughest hike; it was the pinnacle of the trip's test.
We turned for home, next was the San Juan Islands, Washington and the Enchanted
Valley, our last stay in the mountains, and perhaps the most peaceful and beautiful of the
incredible array we had experienced thus far.
18th - 20th July - San Juan Islands:

‘Awoke at 7am on the Haro Straight, a channel frequented by whales, looking over the moorland cliff down to the sea, a grey swell of mist dwindled on the horizon. Then the shooting sound of blowhole exploded from the straight: an awakening in the ocean as pods of orcas swam by us!

San Juan is a sunset island. Its sprawling farmland and rusted houses pull out of great estuaries. Life is slow but beautiful. This is Iron & Wine country, lyrics of the sea, games in the gardens, evening drives, discoveries, all amounting to some magic and a genuine feeling of the American countryside I have dreamed of seeing but never experienced. Now I see the straight deepening into the sea, our ferry waits. I found peace here and am sorry to leave.’
The San Juan Islands are a pocket of tiny islands stretching between Vancouver Island and Seattle. We arrived on San Juan Island on the ferry to Victoria port, a sprawl of small shops greeted us with a road to nowhere leading away from the centre. Driving over the fields that night with the sun going down (fresh from an interrogation by border patrol sighting beards and a genuinely rugged appearance) we listened to Kurt Vile and sped to the other side of the island. That night I watched a perfect sunset sink slowly down over the straight. I have never felt so free and sensed that I had found what I came for. Sleeping next to the Haro Straight we awoke with views of the ocean and a hunger to explore the island. San Juan is tiny and one can drive across it in under an hour. We had heard it was a pancake island not worth exploring, but this simply wasn’t true. Coves, estuaries, harbours and meadows dotted the wooded roadsides. Each road was worth winding down for a new angle of the ocean. We found farms, deserted airstrips, coves and lookout points. One afternoon we discovered something that we had been waiting for since our trip to Norway the previous summer… Orca whales. They burst onto the Haro Straight and at only a hundred metres away one could truly feel the power and majesty such creatures exude. It was an incredibly humbling experience of nature and one that I will never forget. We left San Juan on an early morning ferry to begin our descent of the country we had climbed from Los Angeles. On the way home, we passed through the Enchanted Valley in Washington. We drank wine by a lodge on a lake and breakfasted in a classic small town diner; the walls adorned with photos of previously successful football teams. We continued south, rolling along the coastal roads of California once more. As we did I tried to make sense of what had been a life changing six weeks. It was an epic adventure and gave me further belief that I could do anything with imagination and the confidence to follow an idea. If you’ve read this far then it’s likely you have the same interest to do something similar. Don’t think too much, go and do it. You will never regret it.
30th July - Los Angeles, CA - Homeward Bound

‘At the end if everything I cannot comprehend the distances travelled, the experiences and the passing of time that has gone so fast. LAX again, a better man inside and out, a rich mind and much ambition to follow this. Between the whispers of tall grass in I remember waking in Washington’s Enchanted Valley, far from anything but perfectly at home. This journey is a dream that has blown us from Los Angeles to the north and back... Jon takes his final photograph; I know that lens will project these memories back to me, but behind my eyes I have thousands more, and they are making up the mind I have now. I walk into the day, aware that I am going home, but changed and full of life again.’

I lived in a van for six weeks. With two bags, a camera, rolls of film, a guitar, some food and a desire to explore. Life away from London was healthier, more spontaneous,
rewarding and ultimately life-changing. It is important to see outside these city walls and realize there are other places in the world where happiness can be found. Sitting in a flat perched above Victoria Park I have typed away and explored my mind by examining these images and diary entries. It has been a reflective and meditative process to write this memoir. Exploring the diary again and digging up what was written in a split second has been revealing, humbling and has filled me with a great deal of pride. I have travelled before, but never in the style of spontaneity that I achieved in America. Every day was unwritten and most importantly nothing was guaranteed. This taught me that courage can go a long way and that no place is too foreign, no goal too big. One must trust the idea in itself and follow it until you find it. I did, driving windows down in the San Juan Islands over rolling fields at sunset with my best friend at the wheel. That was a moment of freedom among many on this trip I will never forget. There are more adventures to come, my greatest thanks to Queen Mary for their kind donation that helped make this one happen.

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List of essentials for the road

Tent, decent roll matt, good sleeping bag, head torch, primus/pocket rocket, sporks, plates (plastic), pan, thermals, warm jacket, hiking boots, socks, knife, good lighter, firelighters, good rucksack, water bottles, plastic bags, dry bag for bear country, espresso coffee maker!, sanitizer, UHT milk, tinned food, batteries, beanie, fleece, trek towel, surplus gas, dry snacks, (cliff bars, granola bars), tea + coffee, check water supplies, check gas supplies, maps with contours, weather forecast, proper waterproof trousers, glasses + contacts, medication + first aid, good sat nav, plan ahead - 3 days in advance, look out for gigs and exhibitions, warn friends of arrival, whiskey, stamps + envelopes, disposable cameras for letters home, charged speakers, many pens, a notepad for memoirs and letters.

All photography and short film by Jon Harris available at http://sonicfruits.co.uk/