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Dodging bullets in Iran, hiking alone in Kathmandu and sleeping in a bin in San Francisco: Original hippie trail adventurer Roger Sproston on the lost art of travel

- Today's young backpackers have Instagram GPS phones and Wi-Fi connection in the remotest parts of the world
- But the trail-blazing hippies of the 1970s took off with no plans and little knowledge of what lay ahead
- Roger Sproston, 63, made travelling his life, hitch-hiking from the UK to India via Afghanistan
- His adventures included solo hiking in Kathmandu, living in a skip in San Francisco and dodging bullets in Iran

By EMILY PAYNE FOR MAILONLINE

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Today's young backpackers have Instagram accounts, GPS phones and Wi-Fi connection in some of the remotest parts of the world.

Escapism is furnished with safety nets, spontaneity diminished.

But in the 1970s, inspired by the Beat Generation, whose rejection of the status quo encouraged people to turn on, tune in and drop out, travelling was about heading out with no idea where you might end up, with young people taking off on what became known as the 'hippie trail'.

Roger Sproston was among them. In his book *Fighting for Light: The Travels of a Tin Pot Warrior*, he charts a series of adventures unlikely to happen to travellers hitting the road in modern day.

At the age of 15, Sproston, now 63, joined the British Navy in order to escape his limiting working-class life in Wolverhampton.

A couple of years later, he jumped ship, leading to military prison, a court-marshal and his eventual release.

What followed were years of travel across the globe with little more than the clothes on his back for company.

From dodging bullets in Iran during the revolution to living in a skip in San Francisco and a hair-raising run in with William Bonin, the Highway Strangler, the long-haired wanderer threw himself into adventuring with seemingly little concern for his own safety.

'The world is more paranoid now,' he told Mail Online Travel.

'There's much more insecurity now. In the 1970s there was a different feeling, it was more innocent.

'In those days you could take off with a fiver in your pocket, get yourself to France and put your thumb out.

'I wasn't actually aware of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* when I embarked on my first trip. But it was very much the spirit of the age.

'When I took off in 1978, like a lot of people, it was just pure experience, lets just see what happens. You get there one way or another.

'Looking back you think "Bloody hell I survived that".

'We left home with no more than a fiver and stuck our thumbs out, hoping to make it all the way to India.

'Being young and wanting adventure, I just ignored the possible dangers and went for it.

'You can plan your trips now, people don't people do what we did.

'Most of the time I slept outside in my sleeping bag, It was freedom.'

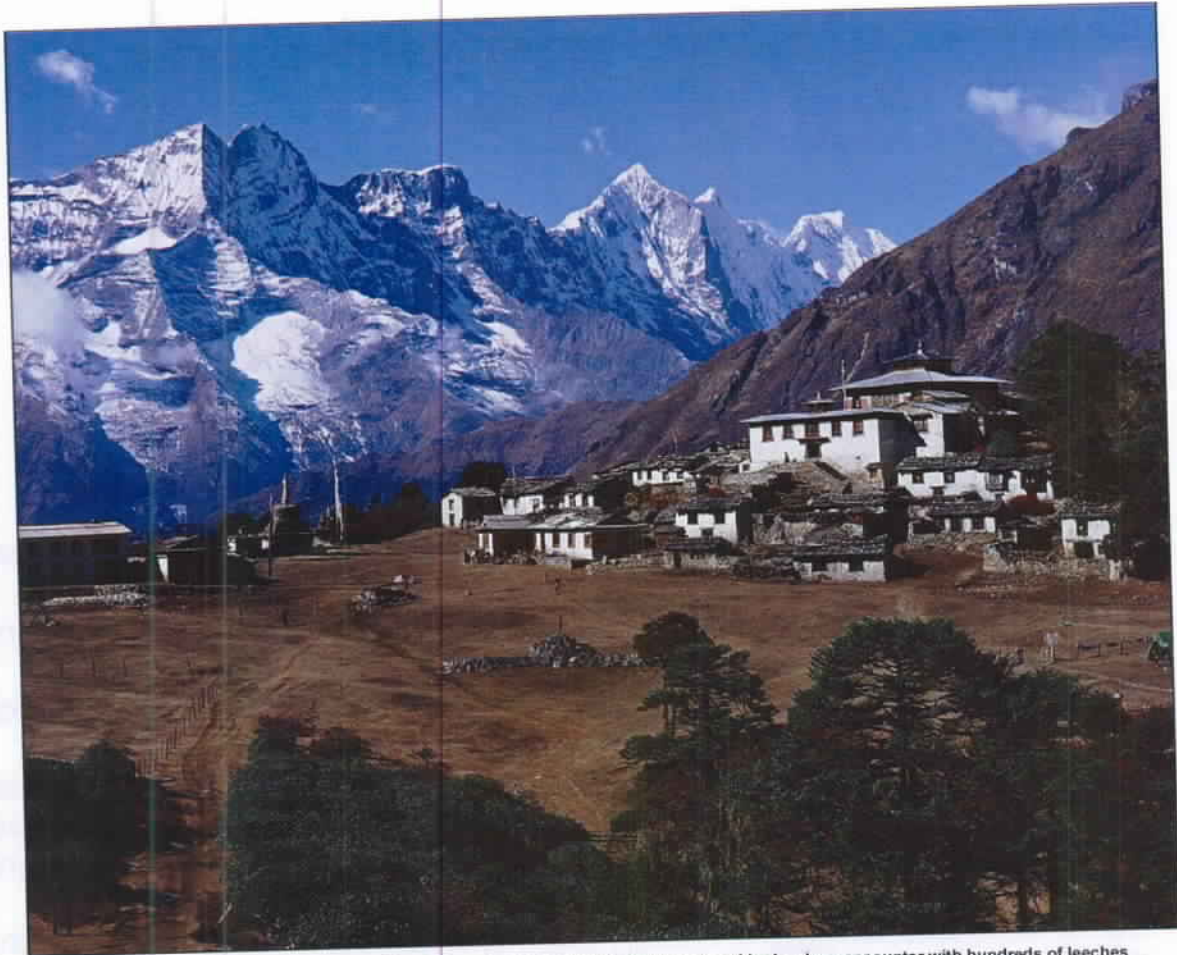
Sproston's first big adventure saw him hitchhike from England to Amsterdam, then driving overland to Munich, onto India via former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan and then onto Nepal - and back again.

One particularly hair-raising moment came in Turkey. 'A group of us were employed to drive cars bound for Tehran, from Munich to Istanbul,' Sproston explained. 'It turns out the cars were stolen.'

The owners were thrown in jail and Sproston and his friends were told in no uncertain terms to leave the country. But each of them had a stamp in their passports stating that they must leave the country in the car they arrived in.



Trail-blazing: Roger Sproston with his backpack in the 1970s



Adventures in the east: During his travels in Nepal, Sproston feasted on buffalo steak and had a close encounter with hundreds of leeches

He said: 'The only way to rectify that was for the passport entry stamps for go awol. We headed to The Pudding Shop in Istanbul, where travellers went to communicate, and the owner offered to get rid of the stamps for us for \$50 each.

'All he did was scrape them off with a razor blade. We could have done it ourselves and ended up having to tear a page out of our passports.'

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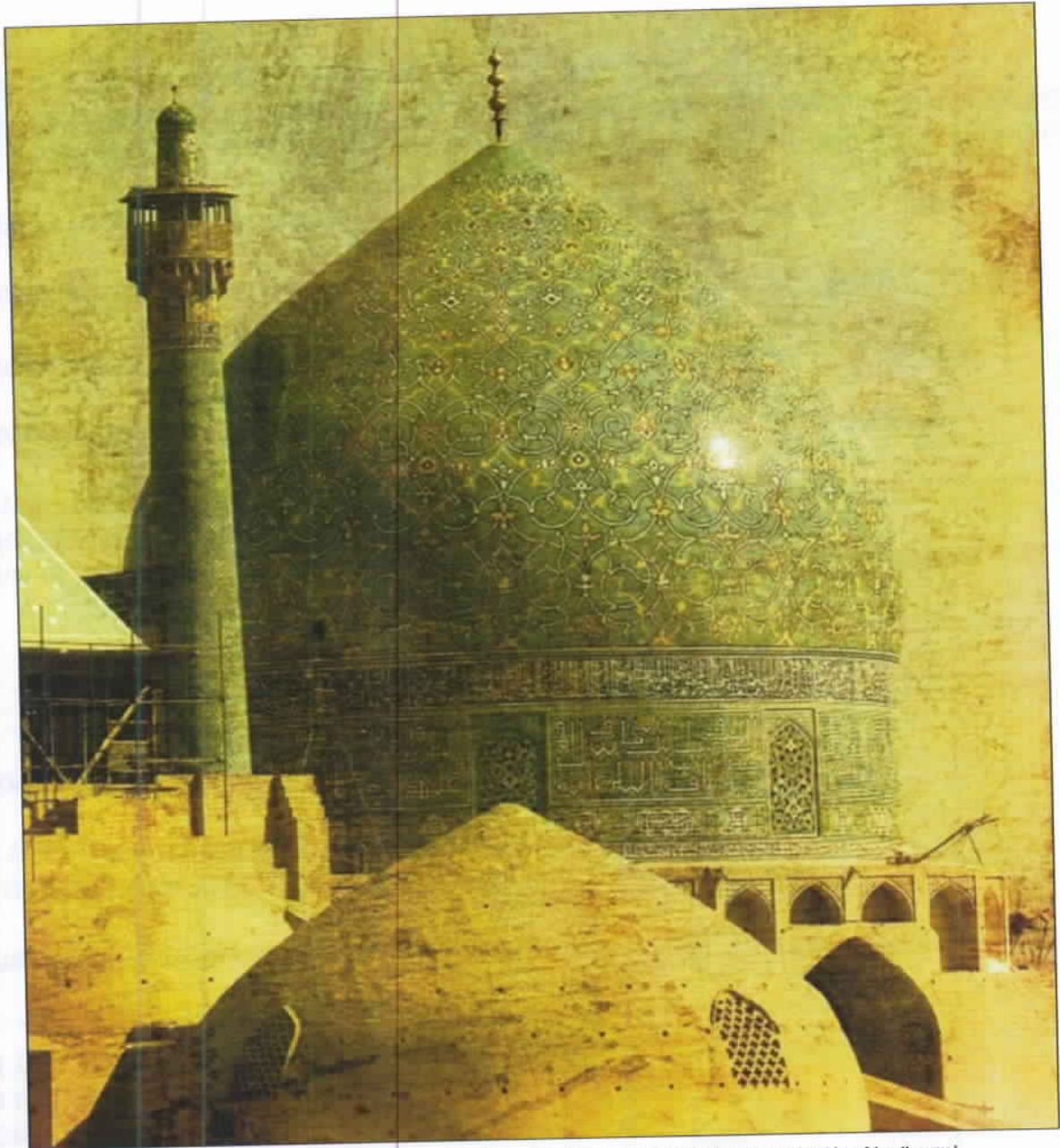


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'It was easy enough to get across India with an incomplete passport. The biggest worry was standing at the border of Turkey and Iran wondering what would happen. This was my first taste of anti-Western feeling. I could feel bad vibes all along the way and noticed that people were staring directly at me and not in a friendly way.

'I picked up another driving job to Tehran, but ended up killing a donkey on the way. There was an almighty thud, the windscreen went through, a hell of a lot of blood with the donkey, or large ass as I found out, flying over the car.

'Work animals are sacred there, so the owner wasn't very happy. It was quite lawless. You could lose your head.



Iran was his first taste of anti-western feeling. 'I could feel bad vibes... People were staring directly at me and not in a friendly way.'

'In India I got seriously ill. I had been sensible enough to have the basic jabs before I left home, but I caught amoebic dysentery from eating fish which had been frozen in New Dehli. I was young and didn't take any precautions.'

Sproston hiked through Nepal feasting on buffalo steak, admiring Mount Everest and regretting not bringing a better camera than his Kodac Instamatic.

He said: 'The most hair-raising moments were crossing a rope bridge which had been cut on purpose and then getting covered head-to-toe in leeches.'

'The return journey from India was more dramatic. I arrived by bus from India to Afghanistan at the same time as the Russians invaded. The bus was interrogated, but when they found a bunch of hippies they just let us go.'



In Afghanistan Sproston began to feel like the infidel. 'Anyone who looked western was fair game,' he says. Stock picture

'When we entered Iran from Afghanistan, it was more hairy. Anyone who looked Western was fair game. We were all ordered off a bus once, and then it was blown to pieces. I thought we were going to die. Ten or fifteen tourists had been killed in this way.

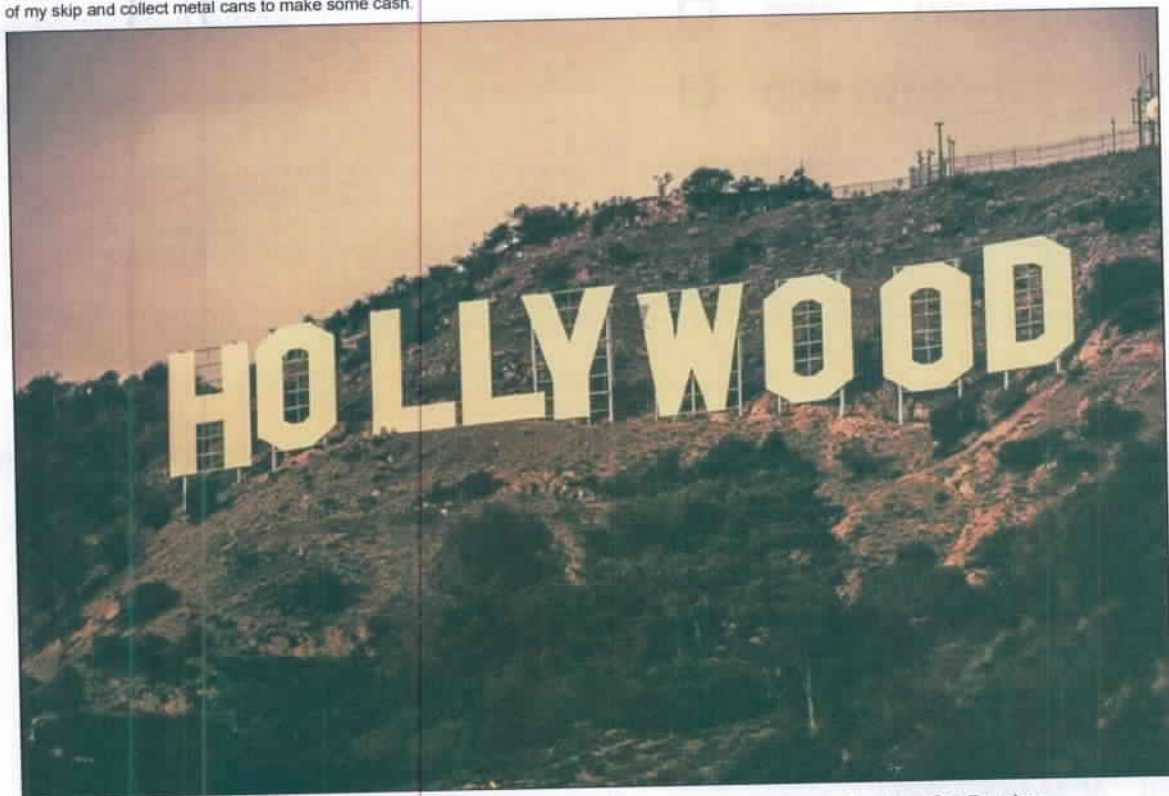
'We managed to escape, but began to feel that we were the infidel, things were not looking too good.'

Sproston, and his travelling buddy Shaun, began to travel by night until they reached the border of Russia. They then crossed back into Turkey.

He said: 'By the time we got there I weighed just eight stone, through illness and stress.'

Sproston's second big trip was to the USA, one which saw him picking apples, getting into scrapes with Inuits and hitch-hiking to San Francisco, where he slept in a skip.

He said: 'I had nowhere to sleep and a couple of dollars on me, what little I had I wanted to preserve. So I lived there for a while, I used to clamber out of my skip and collect metal cans to make some cash.'



Sproston's second big trip was to the USA, one which saw getting into scrapes with Inuits and sleeping in a bin in San Francisco

'Then I stayed in the Cecil hotel, flophouse, a landmark hotel, making money by selling ice cream. But the van got stolen when I went to go and get some bananas, I was left holding the bananas. I had to high tail it out of town.'

'When I was leaving LA I got picked up by a bloke, who turned out to be the Freeway Strangler. He was mumbling about Palestine and Israel, he got a piece of rope and ripped it round my neck. I opened the door and threw myself out of the car. I'm just glad I survived.'

Roger Sproston's brand of travel was not about selfies and box-ticking, it was real adventure, but he says there are things he wishes he had had on the road.

He said: 'The media has changed. I couldn't talk to my parents on Skype - I didn't speak to them in months, I couldn't record my travels. There were no such things as digital cameras then and I regret not being able to photograph what I saw. You can do that easily now with your phone. Travel is probably better in that sense.'

'But it is also more controlled now, the spirit has changed. The route I took, you can't take anymore. The countries I visited are at the forefront of war with the west.'

'I don't think the hippie trail was all brilliant. If you took time to study and were more political aware, maybe you wouldn't have done it. But sometimes it is better to be naive. If you think too much, your own mind can limit you.'

Fighting for Light: The Travels of a Tin Pot Warrior is available in all good book shops.

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BellaGeneva, Palm Springs, United States, 1 day ago
In the 1970's, my girlfriends and I used to hitchhike everywhere. I would hitchhike to college or work in the morning and return to home in the same manner at the end of the day. I traveled alone to many places and camped out to save money and to "be one with nature." The thought of doing so nowadays is, well, unthinkable! I don't even feel safe walking to my car alone at night in most places. I am so grateful for the experiences I had, and for