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# To Japan and Afghanistan in a Topolino

Nicolas Bouvier drove through Asia in an old car from 1953 to 1957. His account of this intrepid journey still holds fascination today.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Two Swiss had the good fortune to own a Topolino – that iconic, diminutive, poetically named “little mouse” manufactured by Fiat from 1936 to 1955: Migros founder Gottlieb Duttweiler (1888–1962), who somehow managed to squeeze his ample frame into the tiny car that is currently exhibited at the Swiss Museum of Transport in Lucerne; and Nico-

unique to someone who believed that the act of travel was “irresistibly effortless, providing a slow but sure introduction to transparency and overcoming one’s self”.

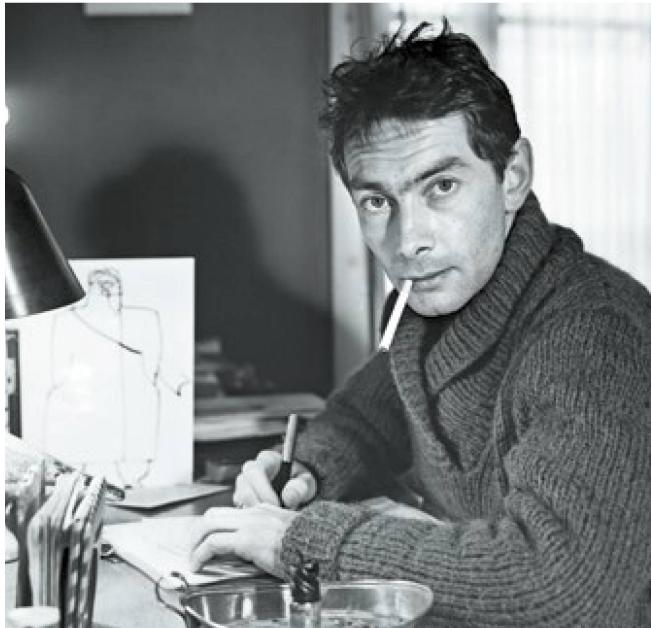
## A new style of travelogue

Bouvier recounts the first stage of their journey, from Belgrade to Kabul, in his 1963 book “The Way of the World”. To cover the costs of the journey, Vernet sold his paintings and Bouvier wrote newspaper articles. The inimitable way in which Bouvier describes their adventures is evident for the first time in this book. Exceptional in his tone, choice of words, and narrative rhythm, Bouvier consistently gets to the heart of the matter, from people to places, always endeavouring to add a human touch to an intrinsically inhuman world. And Bouvier introduces us not only to faraway places, but also to the inner workings of his mind – one that is imbued with subtle emotions and considerable knowledge.

The two friends parted ways on the road after one and a half years, and Bouvier subsequently continued on his own via India to China and then onwards to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he remained for nine months. In “The Scorpion-Fish”, Bouvier described in 1982 how Ceylon’s hot, humid climate sapped his energy – but also how his senses were sharpened while documenting both the insects and the shady localities of this fascinating, frightening island. He left Ceylon in October 1955 and took a French steamboat to Japan, where he stayed for a year, compiling the material that he would share in his 1970 book “The Japanese Chronicles”.

## A low point

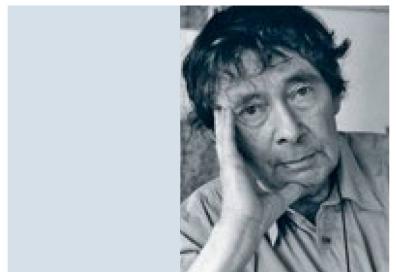
Back in Europe, where in 1958 he married Eliane Petitpierre – the



Nicolas Bouvier (born on 6 March 1929 in Grand-Lancy near Geneva; died on 17 February 1998 in Geneva), who set out in his Topolino in summer 1953 with artist friend Thierry Vernet on an overland journey to Asia, inquisitive and open to the unanticipated adventures and the illumination and self-discovery that lay ahead.

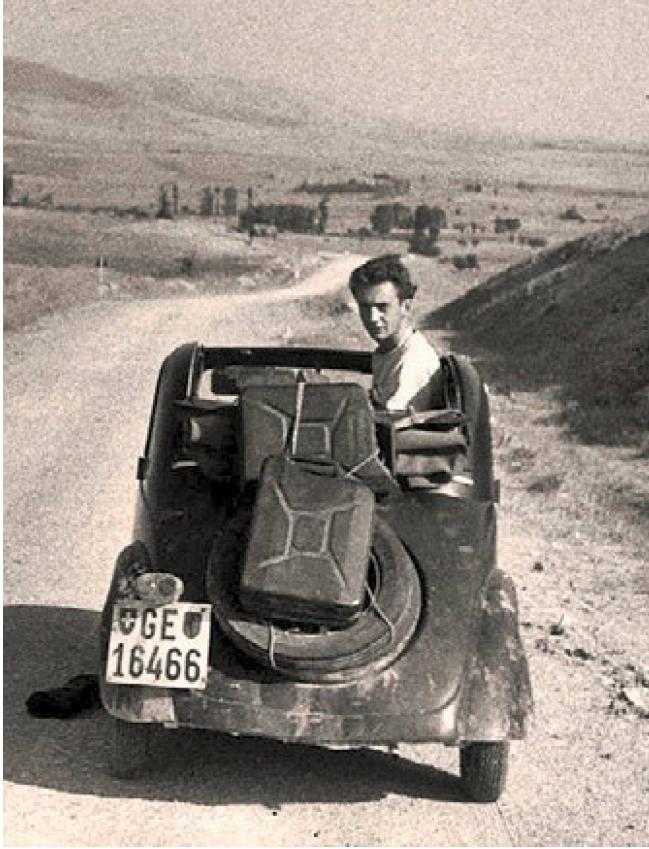
## Irresistibly effortless

They were an idle pair who had two years to play with, enough money to last four months, and an itinerary that took in Turkey, Iran, India and Japan. They would see deserts, mountain passes, cities, and bustling markets, as well as nature in its unrelenting beauty. Bouvier had already visited Lapland, North Africa and the Balkans. But now he was entering the unknown with a fresh outlook and an open-heartedness towards people and things – an attitude



“You do not travel to decorate yourself with exoticism and anecdotes, like a Christmas tree, but for the journey to pluck you, rinse you, wring you out, and hand you back like one of those towels worn out by washes that you’re given with a dash of soap in the brothels.”

(Nicolas Bouvier, “Le Poisson-scorpion” [The Scorpion Fish], Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1996)



## Switzerland in figures

**Cow wins on recount. Marmot thwarted.**

**10 000**

Switzerland has no official national animal. Comedian Claudio Zuccolini therefore decided to hold a plebiscite on the matter. The nominees? Cow, ibex, bear and lion. But the marmot, which had missed out in the nominations, suddenly surged ahead with 10,000 votes. Apparently, the poll had been hacked. Via e-voting. Ouch. The cow won in the end, garnering 52% of the votes. A beef retailer from Grisons, no less, announced this victory for all bovines. In no way is that suspicious.

**330**

Are they going to take place? The fate of the 2021 Olympic Games in Tokyo was still in the balance at the time of going to press. Notwithstanding this, Switzerland has won 330 Olympic medals in total at the Winter and Summer Games to date. The only Olympics at which we won nothing were in 1908, 1912 and 1964.

**37 710 400 000**

The Swiss National Bank announced profits of 37.7 billion Swiss francs in the first quarter of 2021 – shuffling uneasily in the process, given that this is a deluge of money. The same figure would be enough to cover footballer Lionel Messi's salary for 248 years – or pay out a lump sum of 4,351 francs to every person in Switzerland.

**10**

Mandatory, pandemic-related work-from-home policies are now being relaxed. Opinion polls show that only 10 per cent of us want to continue working exclusively from home. Yet most of us want greater flexibility to switch between home and office working in future.

**2**

Travel operators say that many Swiss families double-booked their summer holidays this year, depending on whether they could go abroad or not. Hence, the current flood of cancellations was inevitable.

daughter of a Federal Councillor – and soon became the father of two children, Bouvier needed years to put the fruitful experiences of his four-year trip into writing. The author, who wrestled with every word and was a stickler for accuracy, soon went through a deep, personal crisis that plunged him into despair and alcoholism – an episode that found expression in his 1982 book of poems “Le Dehors et le Dedans” (Inside and outside). But it was precisely by recalling the distant memory of his time in faraway countries that he managed to pull himself out of the abyss. For many, Bouvier’s singular relationship with far-flung localities made him a credible decipherer of the human condition and an utterly unique travel writer.

“Savour the sweetness of life”

From 1963, Bouvier produced a flurry of works reminiscing on his extensive travels between 1953 and 1957. But he also covered subsequent visits to Japan, Korea and China, as well as producing a notable, vivid account of his time on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. Even after his death in 1998, Bouvier – whose mantra was “savour the sweetness of life and the art of living, as if today were your last” – has continued to inspire people around the world to travel with inquisitive, open eyes and treat the unknown with love and respect. Translated into all the main languages, his books have lost none of their magic, not least in this era of mass tourism.

Many of Nicolas Bouvier’s books are available in French, German and English.

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