

# Places Unexpected

By Evan Nesterak

*“In order to rise from its own ashes,  
a phoenix first must burn.”*

—OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

It was a clear, February afternoon along National Route 40 in southern Patagonia, a few miles outside a small Argentine town called Gobernador Gregores. To the southwest, the Playa de los Icebergs peered up to Cerro Torre peak, 10,262 feet high. To the northeast, the remains of a 150-million-year-old forest stood protected by the Parque Nacional Bosques Petrificados. Due north, hundreds of handprints covered the walls of Cueva de las Manos, as they have for the past 9,000 years.

And at this moment in the story, our two main characters, Thomas Andrillon and Chiara Varazzani, 28 years old and married eight months, are hanging upside down in their 2006 Land Rover Defender named Bechamel, still buckled in.

The road wasn't in bad condition. They'd spent the previous two days traversing rocky, mountainous roads as they moved along the Southern Patagonian Ice Field and then inland. But the road they were on, emphasis on *were*, was not like that at all. It was smooth, sealed, flat, and mostly straight.

They weren't inexperienced travelers. Over the past six months, Thomas, Chiara, and

Bechamel made it through Europe, Africa, and South America, crossed one sea, one ocean, dozens of rivers, deserts, and mountain passes, and covered over 10,000 miles.

Thomas, who was driving, wasn't tired. Though they'd passed through some rough terrain, he still felt alert. And, besides, they only had a few more miles to go.

Nevertheless, there they were, the opposite of right side up, suspended in the uncanny calm that comes after metal collides with rock and comes to a stop.

Like so many adventures, Thomas and Chiara's began with a map. They don't remember where they acquired it, but they do remember that their trip started to become real the moment they hung it in the kitchen of their small, Parisian apartment.

Little by little they plotted places they wanted to visit—the dunes in Merzouga, the Mauritanian coast, the volcanoes in the Andes. They took turns adding to the map, usually after a long day in the lab. A circle for yes, dashes for routes and possible detours, red hatching to mark areas to avoid. Initially, it was a way to stave off the monotony of their Ph.D.s, but with each new scribble, the dream of traveling the world for a year after finishing graduate school transformed into something tangible.

They were dedicated to their neuroscience research. Chiara studied how our brain makes trade-offs between expected effort and expected rewards. Thomas investigated the ways our brain senses our environment while we sleep. But as their Ph.D.s wore on, the hours spent isolated in the lab crowded out those spent meeting new people or seeing new places. After half a decade devoted to humans in the form of data points, they could feel their adventurous sides atrophying.

The irony for Chiara and Thomas was that even as they studied aspects of human life so deeply, they so rarely got to live it. Their curiosity to understand people and the world had led them to study the brain and behavior. But out of necessity, their curiosity had gone into hibernation. Now, little by little, it yawned, stretched, stepped back into the world. Imagining where they would go—what they would see, eat, try—became a way to feed it and experiment with

an alternative reality, one free from the dictates and deadlines of their doctorates.

“There will be no trip!” Chiara's father yelled as he pounded the table. A family dinner had soured. “It's too dangerous!” This was not going well, Chiara thought. But it wasn't going unexpectedly either.

Chiara and Thomas had decided they needed to commit. They had been talking about the trip for so long, half joking, half serious, each wondering if the other would eventually nix the whole thing, whether because of a job offer or cold feet about living out of a car for a year. An unspoken game of chicken.

But neither blinked. Instead, they decided to tell people about their plans—their family, friends, and graduate school advisors. They weren't sure what everyone would think of them trading the lab for the road for a year, *at least* a year (in some versions of their imagined futures, they stayed on the road forever or wound up as shepherds in New Zealand), but they knew committing would make it harder to back out.

They would travel the world overland in the off-road Land Rover Chiara shared with her sister, the car Chiara learned to drive on when she was 17, when she had christened it Bechamel. They would outfit Bechamel with a rooftop tent and supplies that would allow them to stick to back roads. They would prepare gear for every type of weather, from below 0° F to over 100° F, versatility they would need for traveling from the Sahara to the Andes. They would sleep anywhere they wanted. They would linger or move on as they pleased.

Their advisors gave their blessing, albeit with a dose of don't-say-I-didn't-warn-you career advice. Their friends wondered if they planned to blog about their travels and seemed confused when Thomas and Chiara explained they had no instrumental motives in mind. Thomas's parents were thrilled and planned to meet them somewhere along the way. Chiara's family was less enthusiastic.

“Basta! Enough!” Chiara's father argued passionately against the trip, complete with the scowl he made when he was arguing with one of his kids, his particular way of pacing back and forth when he was upset. He was worried

that, as foreigners, they would be easy targets for crime or violence. Thomas and Chiara had it in their heads to go so far, for so long, in such remote places, what would they do if something happened? What would *he* do if something happened? He tested them with barbs like, “You're like me as a child, setting up toy soldiers for battle but never actually fighting the war. You'll prepare, but you won't actually go.” He even threatened to sabotage Bechamel to keep them in Europe.

Chiara spent hours reasoning with him, explaining how his perception of what might go wrong was skewed. We hear about all the trips that go horribly wrong but not the ones that go right. Statistically speaking, she told him, the thing to fear the most would be a car accident.

“Did you hit a llama?” Seeing Bechamel flipped on her roof and a pair of shaky foreigners 20 yards away, two local guys pulled over to check if Thomas and Chiara were alright. Thomas, surprised by the question, explained that their two-ton vehicle had *not* run into a llama.

“Did you fall asleep?” No. Thomas was sure he had been awake. He had been aware of what he was thinking before he crashed, so how could he be asleep? He explained that his mind was just sort of elsewhere, that he'd gotten distracted and oversteered; it was the first curve in miles.

Sizing up the damage—physical for Bechamel and psychological for Thomas and Chiara, who were shaken but uninjured—the two guys offered to help flip Bechamel back over and tow them the rest of the way to town. Thomas, still in shock, rode shotgun in the windshieldless Bechamel as one of the guys steered, the two of them eating crushed glass and road debris for



Bechamel, the 2006 Land Rover Defender. Thomas and Chiara's transport and home for a year between 2016 and 2017.

ORIGINAL PHOTO: Chiara Varazzani and Thomas Andrillon.

the half hour to Gobernador Gregores. Chiara rode in the lead vehicle, which dropped the three of them, Thomas, Chiara, and Bechamel, off at the town's only hotel.

**O**n the road, it was easy to let your mind wander. At times, there's wasn't much else to do. And that was the point.

When they left from Chiara's parents' house in Tuscany in August 2016, the plan was to have no plan. They had a general direction in mind, but there was no itinerary. What Thomas and Chiara craved was freedom and unpredictability, serendipity and spontaneity, something other than a straight line.

Their first month on the road, they made their way from Italy through the Alps, into southern France, across the Pyrenees into Spain, south along Portugal's western coast,

and then back into southern Spain. There, they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into Morocco. For the next three months, they drove south down Africa's western edge, across the Sahara Desert and along the Atlantic. Shortly before Christmas in 2016, they boarded a freighter in Dakar, Senegal, that took them all the way to Montevideo, Uruguay, where they began their trek through South America.

With each mile that ticked by, each campsite, each sunrise and sunset, each conversation or meal shared with a stranger, they shed the expectations, habits, and routines built for the confines of their lives in Paris.

They formed new rituals. Each afternoon, they would decide where to camp for the night. They searched for places where they might be in nature, secluded, and they tried to set up in time to enjoy the sunset. They were guided by

Thomas and Chiara wandered through three continents during their year on the road.

**ORIGINAL PHOTO:** Chiara Varazzani and Thomas Andrillon.



strangers they met. They followed recommendations to stop at this place or that, find someone in the next town. They trusted invitations to stay in the homes of people who, like Thomas and Chiara, were simply curious to learn about someone else's life, if for only a moment.

They tuned into their mental rhythms. In the mornings, Thomas discovered that he needed time to process his thoughts, almost as a way to finish his dreams from the night before. After driving, they learned to let their minds go free, a way to decompress after focusing on the road. They observed their power to incubate a new idea. With no pressure to bring it from the mental to the physical world until it was ready, they followed along as ideas sprang up and developed, disappeared or stuck around.

They had spent the last five years studying other people's brains. Now, the long miles on the road, outside of the lab, afforded them an intimate experience with their own.

**O**n family trips, Thomas's dad had a rule: vacations were expensive and complicated to plan, so Thomas and his brother were not allowed to read in the car. They were expected to look out the window, to see and experience the place they traveled to. On those trips, he first experienced where the mind could take you, how wandering in the physical world paralleled wandering in the mental world.

With each mile he and Chiara wandered, Thomas became more and more curious about the activity streaming through our waking minds. In graduate school, Thomas studied sleep as a way to explore consciousness—to parse its flow and ebb, when we're awake, as we fall asleep, enter different sleep stages, and dream.

Thomas entered a field where sleep was often presented as an all or nothing phenomenon—when we're asleep we're unconscious or dreaming and, as a result, disconnected from our physical environments. But we don't fall off the bed when we sleep. Sleepwalkers avoid physical obstacles in their environment. When sleeping mothers hear the cries of their own children, they're more likely to wake than for those from other children.

For his dissertation, he investigated what happens in the brain that allows us to perceive

something in our environment while we're sleeping. He conducted a series of studies to parse how the brain processes different stimuli during sleep. He found the brain could recognize language, learn patterns, determine categories, and prepare reactions, despite the brains' owners being asleep and unaware. Certain brain areas would respond with an activity similar to what they showed when awake, despite other regions showing a state of sleep. The sleeping brain isn't completely shut off from its environment.

**T**he morning after the crash, Thomas and Chiara hustled around the town of 7,000, looking for someone who could repair Bechamel. In a bitter twist, the worst damage had occurred when the two guys right-sided Bechamel; at one point, all the weight had rested on the corner of the front, passenger-side roof, which crumpled like a crushed Coke can.

As they searched for a repair shop, they faced a repeated line of questioning. *Did they hit an animal? No. Asleep? No. Alcohol? No. What happened? Distracted. Really? That road is good.* To the locals, it didn't make sense—a crash with no cause. Eventually, after running through this script a handful of times, Thomas and Chiara gave in. They went with the llama.

Fortunately, the locals were as helpful as they were skeptical. They pointed Thomas and Chiara to a metal shop, run by a guy called El Gringo. In a few days, he estimated that he would be able to get it drivable, but he couldn't fully repair it. They would have to take it to a mechanic who had the proper tools and parts for Bechamel's aluminum body.

It wasn't ideal, but they were relieved. Their relief was brief. Chiara got news that her grandmother had passed away, and she was needed at home. She'd have to leave and meet up with Thomas later. Unable to drive their own car, she left Thomas at El Gringo's shop and hitchhiked to the nearest airport in Rio Gallegos, some 350 miles away.

So, Thomas was alone. He spent the next few days waiting for Bechamel to be patched up, then he set off on a 1,700 mile, 10-day solo drive north to Mendoza, Argentina, where there was a mechanic who could do the full repair. For two weeks he replayed the crash in his head. Why had he flipped Bechamel? What had happened



Bechamel peers across a desert in Peru.

**ORIGINAL PHOTO:**  
Chiara Varazzani and Thomas Andrillon.

in his mind that nearly killed them? Hitting a hypothetical llama worked to satisfy people's curiosity in conversation, but it did nothing to placate his own.

**“T**he participants look tired,” Thomas's research assistant told him in 2017. “Even if they say they're mind wandering, it looks like they want to fall asleep.”

That didn't seem right to Thomas. That hadn't been his experience during the trip. His hypothesis was that mind wandering was a form of impulsivity, a sign of a vivid imagination or a symptom an overactive mind, not one on the brink of sleep.

After their year on the road, Thomas and Chiara moved to Australia. Chiara was recruited to help lead the government's new behavioral science team. Thomas made good on his interest in mind wandering and landed a postdoc where he could study it.

Now, his mind-wandering research had hit upon an unexpected question. Why would people who report that their mind is wandering look like they're falling asleep?

Thomas knew there was a link between sleep and hyperactivity: people who are sleep-deprived often show sluggishness, but paradoxically, sleep deprivation causes impulsivity too. Other work showed different parts of the brain enter sleep at different times, meaning some parts are asleep while others are still awake, a sign that sleep isn't global, it's local—brain regions can enter or exit sleep and wakefulness differently. And of course, he had spent his Ph.D. figuring out how particular parts of the brain tune into our environments when we are asleep. As the pieces came together, he was surprised he was just now seeing the picture.

He set up several experiments recording participants' brain activity as they completed long and monotonous tasks. When participants reported mind wandering, Thomas found they had sleep-like waves in their prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for executive function—despite being behaviorally awake. And when their minds wandered, they were more likely to respond impulsively on the task. The wandering brain can be an impulsive brain, not because of hyperactivity or hyperarousal, as Thomas originally thought, but because sleep can creep into the waking brain.

As he drove to Mendoza alone, Thomas thought back to the day of the crash.

The morning had been a particularly pleasant one. The weather was better than it had been for the past month. It wasn't as cold or windy. He and Chiara had lingered outside, tinkering with their gear and Bechamel. They found a minor electrical issue with the brake lights that they decided they wanted to get fixed. They didn't typically stay in cities, but they settled on passing through Gobernador Gregores to see if someone there could repair it.

The first road had been a road in a looser sense of the term, rough and rock covered. To avoid too much vibration, he had driven at higher speeds, gliding over the rugged surface, on high alert for larger rocks, which would damage the car. When they made it to National Route 40, Chiara had asked if he wanted to switch. He remembered saying he'd keep going.

Chiara had read from an almanac her father had given them for their trip. They had developed a routine of reading from it to help pass the time. Whoever the passenger was would thumb through the book, select a country, and read out loud. There was information about topography and demographics, crops, livestock, manufacturing.

She had been reading something about Myanmar. He didn't remember what, but his mind had gone to border crossings and Bechamel. Crossing the border as a person was straightforward. Crossing with a car conjured a different level of bureaucratic red tape. Governments worked hard to prevent the illegal import of cars like Bechamel. There were more regulations to study, more paperwork to fill out, and more uncertainty to navigate. What would crossing the border be like in Myanmar? Where would be the best place to cross? How long would it take to clear immigration?

Lost in his thoughts, he had noticed the curve too late. He tried to correct it but oversteered. Bechamel swerved right, then left, right, then left. He remembered cursing the laws of physics. As Bechamel began to flip down a slope, his mind had gone to his sailing days—*enfournage*, when a boat flips nose first. Once, he had dropped from first to last in a race this way. Then, they capsized in the Patagonian Desert.

He remembered all that. His mind had been wandering. "How could he have been asleep?" he wondered.

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Five years after their trip, Thomas and Chiara have found their way back to Paris. There, Chiara is the lead behavioral scientist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, helping bring together and develop government behavioral science teams from around the world. Thomas is a researcher at the Paris Brain Institute. They still have a sense of adventure, though it's taken the form of chasing their toddler, Bianca, around their apartment.

During their trip, somewhere in the Andes, Chiara remembers reading Thomas a line from *The Undoing Project*. A quote from psychologist Amos Tversky: "The secret to doing good research is always to be a little underemployed. You waste years by not being able to waste hours."

For Thomas, the discovery that sleep intrudes our waking lives when we're mind wandering means that the borders we've used to define our mental lives are more porous than we think. We spend about one-third of our lives asleep, and 50 percent of our waking hours mind wandering. What it means to be asleep or awake, conscious or unconscious, dreaming or not, may be less distinct, more continuous, full of grays and in-betweens, liminal spaces he's just beginning to explore.

Traveling the world by car might not be the fastest way to get somewhere, but isn't that the point? When we wander physically or mentally, what shapes us is the process. We create new connections and rid ourselves of old ones. Borders blur and we venture off path. We find ourselves in places unexpected. ■

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Evan Nesterak is the editor of *Behavioral Scientist*.



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