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## NEWS

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### Wisconsin couple take Packers everywhere

Posted Mar 3, 2012  
 By Ricky Zeller



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It all started with two Packers fans, 40 thumbtacks and a large world map mounted on their kitchen wall. Add in a healthy dose of adventure, the courage to sell their possessions and abandon the security of their jobs, and Jeff and Eileen Schoenfeldt, with their gold Packers flag, set out on a rambling, year-long journey in which they set foot on all seven continents.

Though the flag returned relatively unscathed, the couple's passports are well-worn and checkered with stamps. The "G" emblem has now straddled the equator in Rwanda, flapped proudly in the breeze at Easter Island and been unfurled in front of the pyramids. The Schoenfeldts flew the Packers colors from Paris to Thailand, and the edge of the flag was briefly gnawed on by a kangaroo in Australia.

They began to call themselves "Green & Gold Ambassadors," perhaps it was somewhere near Kuala Lumpur. They even made it back in time to watch the team's Super Bowl XLV victory from a friend's couch in their hometown of Fitchburg, Wis.

It was an unforgettable year for the Schoenfeldts. This is their story.

"When we talk about the trip, people either say you guys are crazy, or that they totally wish they could do the same thing," said Jeff, who grew up 45 minutes from Lambeau Field. "It's interesting. It's a split crowd. I think it says a lot about the person by their initial reaction. Sometimes you find out someone is more nuts than you thought they were."

Jeff and Eileen were world travelers already. Their honeymoon was a safari in Tanzania, and they had seen much of Europe.

The rest of the world was waiting, but there's only so much time off from work. Eileen suggested taking a year off from everyday life, Jeff didn't need his arm twisted, and the plan was hatched. One of them bought a map of the globe and fastened it to the wall. They divvied up the 40 tacks. Each pinned 20 on destinations they'd like to visit.

"We kind of made a wish list of where we wanted to go, but going to 40 places in a year is undoable," Jeff said recently. "We started ruling out some countries because it has to be a coordinated effort. Japan was too expensive. In Russia, you need a visa and they hold your passport. At the end of the day, we got it down to about two dozen countries, and we got to them all except South Africa."

Drawing the route was a little complicated, but easy compared to raising the funds. Their house immediately went up for sale. Both of their cars were sold. They had a dozen rummage sales, and the rest was auctioned off online. Eventually there wasn't much left to unload.

"We tried to liquidate everything we could," Jeff said. "I sold almost everything, our TVs, tables and furniture - I didn't want to have a big storage room with stuff packed away while we were gone. At the time I was under the impression I'd be able to sell our house. So for the cash and for storage reasons, we wanted to get rid of everything."

The house never sold, so they rented it to a friend. Jeff locked away some clothing and the few possessions they had remained in the basement. He and Eileen quit their jobs - both worked in state government and they had given ample warning of their desire for adventure. This wasn't the typical, two-week notice situation.

At the same time, both were going through the legion of health vaccinations necessary for travels through jungles, mountaintops and deserts. Jeff was buying tickets for flights and tours and making hotel reservations for the first six months. After those expenses, they had \$40,000 in the bank.

They made a pretty firm budget, but not to the point where they couldn't veer off for unexpected fun periodically. The entire trip cost about \$135,000, and all they came back with was a little credit card debt, weathered shoes and over 34,000 photos. They did keep track of every dollar, to the point of documenting what a candy bar costs in Tahiti.

The flag came from Eileen's brother, John O'Neill. He is a diehard Packers fan now transplanted in Colorado, and he felt they needed something definitive to display at each landmark.

"We met more people and made so many friends because of that flag," Jeff said. "It was a topic of conversation. My wife carried that flag in her backpack 24 hours a day, seven days a week, no matter where we went, and it would sink to the bottom with stuff on top of it. She'd take it out and it looked like we just got done

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ironing it. I don't know what it's made of, but those things are incredibly durable."

Her responsibility for the flag came in particularly useful for Eileen on a steamy afternoon in Cambodia.

"When we visited Angkor Wat, which is this huge area of many Buddhist shrines, we weren't told that the main temple was still a working house of worship," she said. "I was wearing shorts because it was over 90 degrees and I wasn't going to be allowed in because my knees had to be covered. I grabbed the Packers flag and wrapped it around me like a skirt. The guy at the entrance just smiled and let me in."

While inside the temple, Eileen removed the flag briefly, and a worshiper waved incense around it with a swinging tray for luck. They give him partial credit for the Super Bowl victory.

While posing with the flag, the Schoenfeldts heard the familiar "Go Packers!" in Antarctica, at the pyramids in Egypt and at the Sydney Opera House in Australia. They swapped stories with a Saints fan in a bar in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and met a Jets fan in Jerusalem.

The Schoenfeldts' first destination was Patagonia at the southern tip of Chile. They hiked four hours up narrow paths to the base of the Towers of Paine, massive granite formations reaching into the clouds that form a small mountain group. In a moment of triumph following the trek, the Packers flag made its first appearance.

"By the end of the trip, the most important photo we wanted to take at each stop was the Packer flag picture," Jeff said.

They went from there to Antarctica – the most expensive leg of the journey, with the ship tickets alone running \$7,000 each. After that, in order, the Schoenfeldts went to Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, Peru, Chile and Easter Island, Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia, Kuala Lumpur, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Nepal, India, Dubai, Bahrain, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, London, Paris, Uganda and Rwanda.

They learned you have to be your own traveling pharmacy; that six weeks in India will send you to Dubai in search of a five-star hotel with a soft bed and an all-beef hamburger, and that explaining American football during a motorcycle trip down the Ho Chi Minh trail in Vietnam to someone who doesn't speak English is a challenge. It's hard for Jeff to pick a favorite memory.

"The top of the list almost has to be Antarctica," he said. "It's so remote and so beautiful and the animals are amazing. On the trip, the animals are a constant theme, other than the Packers flag. In Thailand, we had our own elephants for three days in the jungle. We took care of them, bathed them, we were in charge of them. We had guides, but they didn't speak English. I'm pretty sure the elephants didn't speak English."

They also kept track of the Packers' fortunes throughout the 2010 season. A great regret is that Dallas for Super Bowl XLV wasn't on the itinerary, or in the budget.

"When you leave for that amount of time, you search for things that remind you of home," Jeff said. "The Packers were that for us throughout the trip. We are lifelong fans. To this day it kills us that the Packers made the Super Bowl and we weren't able to go. We were too broke when we got back. We've always said when the Packers went, so would we. I've told Eileen that if we do it again and the Packers are in the Super Bowl, no matter where we are in the world, we're going."

The happy ending is when they returned to Wisconsin both had already landed jobs similar to the ones they walked away from before departing. While in Paris, Eileen interviewed via online videoconferencing. Jeff nailed down a position by the same method while in Dubai.

And as for the flag?

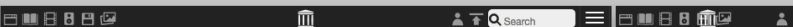
"It's folded on our bookshelf," Jeff said with a laugh. "I think it will come on every trip now. It has to."

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