

BEGINNINGS



ABOVE Mali, Sahara Desert, 2007.

Smiles are passports through deserts
and visas to all foreign lands.

So wrote Mr Darrah, our school principal, in my autograph book. As a thirteen-year-old girl from the so-called “wrong” side of the tracks in Calgary, Canada, I shrugged. *What’s a passport? A visa? Who cares?* Foreigners were *different*; all I wanted was to be the same: fit in, wear unaffordable brands and hang out with the in crowd. I certainly didn’t want to be like my father, a once-penniless immigrant with a thick Dutch accent, nicotine-stained teeth and old-fashioned tweed suit. Neighbourhood kids taunted, “Your old man’s a DP (Displaced Person)!” Shamefully, I agreed. Sorry, Dad.

What was I thinking? Not much at all in those self-centred teenage days. I hadn’t yet begun to understand the sting behind terms like “DP”, “wog” or “refugee”. I had no backpack, suitcase or emotional baggage, but my values were more misplaced than my luggage has ever been since.

I had no idea then how those words from my principal would burrow deep into my psyche. And no idea my father, who quietly embodied a kindness I’d taken for granted, would die of lung cancer before I understood much of anything. I’d give anything now to hear his Dutch accent

again. Or my maternal grandfather’s gentle Scottish brogue.

My parents and grandparents travelled to Canada not as tourists, but as migrants in search of hope on a distant shore. And although my first trip across an ocean was also born from a sense of hopelessness, future journeys were driven by curiosity, choice, and perhaps a touch of crazy adventure.

As a child, travel was never on my radar. We received postcards from a second cousin in Glasgow who nursed in India and Egypt during World War II. I vividly remember a black-and-white photo of her atop a camel by the pyramids. Still, I wasn’t drawn to far-off lands. Motion sickness on the Greyhound bus to my cousins’ place was enough to deter any wanderlust.

Little did I know that both my parents would die within a year of my university graduation. Then my boyfriend left me. With no immediate family, I abandoned a secure university lecturing position with only a backpack, A\$200 and a one-way ticket to visit my best friend. She and her husband were on a teaching exchange in Melbourne, Australia. Lacking purpose and

direction, I was simply an anxious young woman clutching her first passport.

What began as a three-month working holiday turned into over fifty years of calling Australia home – and travelling the world. In foreign lands, like my father, I became a “displaced person” facing fear, uncertainty, and sometimes hostility.

There was no internet or *Lonely Planet* when I started out. But I needed guidance on life, not logistics. Grief stalked me whether I ventured around the block or across the globe. And especially when vulnerable or when things go wrong, the kindness of random strangers often makes it right.

Never could I have imagined in my wildest childhood dreams, or those many moments of young adult despair, the natural highs of climbing nearly 6000 metres to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro or floating 400 metres below sea level at the lowest point on Earth. There at the Dead Sea, I felt fully alive, as I did beyond Mount Everest base camp to celebrate my sixtieth birthday.

Yet most days don't have such dramatic highs or lows. We tend to remember extremes of good and bad, both on and off the road – food, weather, companions, experiences. I've lost my luggage, my way, my patience and sometimes, the entire plot. Yet as travellers we find far more than we ever lose – new friends, new perspectives and newfound, reserves of resilience.

Clean drinking water was sometimes missing, but rarely my thirst for exploration. Travel showed me that good and bad exist in every ethnic group, as surely as diverse landscapes and languages alter our perspective.

Make no mistake – travel for its own sake is a luxury, whether done in business class or on a backpacker budget. It seduces many, scares others, and challenges all of us to leave our

comfort zone for a courage zone – and hopefully a kindness zone, regardless of time zone.

I've kept a journal every night since my teens. Many observations in this book come from fleeting encounters I had as a guest speaker or traveller – either solo or on a tour or cruise. It's been harder to do justice to countries where I lived. After eighteen months in Tokyo, I wrote an entire book on Japan but struggle to fill a paragraph about Paraguay following a fleeting visit. After three months in Japan, I thought I understood it, but after two years I realised how much I had to learn.

So how long must one stay in a country to write about it? Long enough to leave with something more than a passport stamp. Thoreau wrote his legendary *Walden*, not in distant wilderness but less than 3 kilometres from his home. And Kipling never ventured on the actual “Road to Mandalay. I've only set foot in a handful of countries for a single day, and airport stopovers don't count.

The real challenge wasn't what to include in this written peregrination, but what to leave out ... of a suitcase or a manuscript? You can't pack every favourite shirt or anecdote, and it's as inevitable as jetlag that a much-loved aspect of your homeland or favourite destination is missing.

When nations march into the stadium at the Olympic Games, the United States, China and other superpowers wait their turn behind tiny Andorra, Brunei and Cuba. I adopt a similar approach here.

This A-Z of the over 150 countries I've visited isn't a tourist guide, romantic romp or single-destination memoir. I wanted to go beyond sensationalised headlines and hashtags, beyond politics and postcodes and most certainly beyond national stereotypes, to share some reflections on kindness, courage and connection among the over eight billion bodies who share this planet. You may be reminded of your own travels, or for

those who have never ventured far, experience places you only dreamt to visit – or dreaded to go.

So how many countries are there? Borders constantly change, while definitions and sources vary. The UN currently has 193 members and the Olympics 206. I've visited approximately three-quarters of them across seven continents – plus many territories.

In this book I have taken some creative licence in defining what counts as a country: Hong Kong was independent when I lived there but is now part of China. Tibet maintains it is still independent of China so who am I to argue with the Dalai Lama? My grandfather would turn in his Scottish grave to be lumped with the English, so I've included Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland as four distinct countries. And

although Antarctica is not a nation, in my book, a continent trumps a country.

In this way, there were nations for every letter except X – so the “X” chapter is simply a cross-section of observations.

Fair enough, don't you think? There's enough global conflict without sparring over words. So, let's get on with this armchair journey – beyond politics and picture-perfect postcards – to observations of everyday life, told by an ordinary person who's been privileged to have extraordinary encounters. From the big picture of real places to smaller portraits of real people – so much like us.

You might just find, as I have, that in the farthest corners of our weird but wonderful world, you recognise yourself. I hope you enjoy this vicarious voyage.

BELOW Japan,
Japanese Alps,
circa 1987.

