

Diálogos

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The Essence of Travel:

Piecing Together our Personal Jigsaw Puzzle?

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The travel bug – arguably the longest-living insect known to humans – bit our ancestors more than two million years ago and has been on a conquering spree ever since. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs interestingly seems to capture what feeds it.

Our early ancestors sparked the great human migration and defined our history of travel; their journey fuelled by an imperative to meet basic needs – food and water – far away from the competition. Where they left off, explorers from diverse lands picked-up with less pressing, survival-driven motives, defined by unquenchable aspirations to discover, explore, influence and conquer. Altogether, they helped elucidate the collective pieces of the enormous jigsaw puzzle that is our world today. One giant map finally emerged. We could see it, touch it, contentiously discuss it... and finally understand our place within it?

Not entirely. The global picture may have been complete; yet, each of our individual places in this global puzzle was anything but defined, and if or when so, these “places” are rarely static. For some of us, personal journeys endure on account of self-actualization – the zenith of Maslow’s Pyramid. The rest of us may find ourselves voyaging up and down the pyramid, slipping in and out of travel fuelled by necessity at times, pleasure and personal

development at others. Each journey painstakingly creates, shapes or better defines one more piece required to complete our personal jigsaw puzzle.

From immigration, to adventure, to personal and professional development, our collective journeys translated here are a compilation of anecdotes about the relentless pursuit to “solve” our personal jigsaw puzzles.

You have a history of immigration from post-communist Albania to the epicentre of capitalism, America. Did you ever feel wrapped in a duel of identities? Having to choose between loyalty to your past or to your future? And if so, how did you reconcile both?

Alba: There was no duel of identities (or so I thought). Within my first six months in the US, I defined one goal for myself – assimilate! I arrived in the country at the age of 13. I knew enough English words as I had fingers and toes, minus one – I had learned the word “handkerchief” thinking that I would impress with a long, complex word. Come to find out, Americans prefer their tissues.

My family’s departure from Albania was rushed to say the least. We had won the lottery – the Green Card lottery, also known as the United States Diversity Immigrant Visa Program. It was 1998. Albania was at the height of a civil unrest sparked by fraudulent financial schemes that robbed the country’s savings to the tune of more than \$1 billion (for a country of three million people, it wasn’t inconsequential). My family’s savings were devoured by the Ponzi schemes like the rest of our fellow countrymen’s and women’s. The U.S. Embassy in Tirana had closed following the demise of the government, widespread chaos, and an ensuing civil rebellion. The only certainty was uncertainty. Would we make it out?

I felt as though I took my first full breath when our plane finally lifted. Once in the U.S., it was off to the races – shed the past and focus on progress (how I had defined it at the young age of 13). I worked hard to learn and then fine tune my English – middle-schoolers don’t take kindly to accents. I immersed myself in my American friendships and my full life of activities – ballet, rehearsals, performances. Ultimately, I ended up achieving my goal. I (overly) assimilated. And, the questions “Where are you from? Where is home?” didn’t get easier to answer. “I don’t need to delve into my personal life story” I thought. “They probably won’t even know where Albania is”.

“The U.S! Ohio is home” I would answer hastily. And then one day, it creeps up on you. In the quest to fit in, to sound like the rest, to honour the place that opened the golden doors of opportunity, and to ultimately succeed, regrettably stuck in my adolescent definition of success, you may have defined the ingredients perhaps incorrectly. As in my case, I had mixed an unrecognizable elixir, drained of most of the ingredients I deep down knew ought to form its base.

Reconciliation would come in the unlikeliest of places as I set out in my next journey, this time professional.

In your personal journey, what has traveling meant for you? A quest for the unknown, an escape, or perhaps arriving at a new “home”?

Tiago: A bit of all those, I guess, and in different amounts according to the moment. The allure of the unknown, of remote places, inhabited by “foreign people” is definitely strong for me. On the other hand, travelling is always an escape, more so if you embark on it with a hunting trip mindset longing for life references or enlightenment trophies.

I rarely travelled with personal development in mind; it was a bonus that came along the way, mainly because I had more time alone with ample space to pause and reflect. Wisdom and serenity don’t require an *instagramable* ashram or a fair trade, hand-woven and organically-grown cotton blanket. The shade of a walnut tree and old newspaper sheets will do just fine. They do, however, require the courage to pause and the discipline to reflect.

I believe “home” can be found in many places. The act of travelling can be a home in itself. I feel very at home walking endless hours carrying a backpack, sitting on a train *ad aeternum* or diving several times a day until the skin in your hands shrinks to one’s insignificance. Although, I felt affinity and great connection with several people in Cuba, Nepal and Sierra Leone, the greatest breakthroughs happened in the simplest of acts – reading a book or somewhere in a remote lonely trek in the mountains.

People travel for work, leisure, to relax, escape problems, or any reason good enough to deviate us from the mundane path of orderly mass consumerism. And somehow, we end up in the same bubble of mass consumerism, now encapsulated under a new, trendier, seldom ready-made spiritual shell. Mass tourism evolved greatly from the dodgy time-shares bordering

overcrowded beaches of the 1980's to a plethora of 21st century tailored offers that promise to satisfy all of our transcendental needs. From yoga and meditation retreats, to deep-colon cleansing, biodynamic agriculture workshops, or Tibetan bowls' chakra healing, the wellness experiences' catalogue is humongous. All designed to appease our needs for increased connection and to fill an empty emotional shopping bag.

The path to enlightenment is a long one, but is it really necessary to travel thousands of miles to remote monasteries in distant countries? Is trendy isolation in a self-improvement package a frivolous climatic sin accessible to privileged western bourgeoisie or a valid path to wisdom?

Being a very curious sceptical, I've done one Buddhist retreat; a couple of emotional intelligence courses; and a few hundred yoga and meditation sessions. I've found them all useful under one condition – consistent practice. Meditation, in particular, revealed itself a remarkably useful tool, able to shake me from autopilot straight into reality a few times a day. It also helps to nurture the little frightened, yet deadly Godzilla that inhabits my amygdala. In all, it helps me unlock a better, kinder version of myself.

The nirvana is not across the curve. It's the sustained practice that yields benefits and my instantaneous rewards' driven brain continues to boycott progress spectacularly. Now at least, I know where I stash some useful tools.

In past travels, I have found significant joy in meeting “ephemeral life-long friends”, soulmates that last one journey, but that under the right conditions could maybe last a lifetime. I experienced a strong connection with fellow trekkers in the Khumbu Valley, in the Himalayan range, despite silence rarely being disturbed by other than the sound of mountain boots crushing ice and gravel. A more perceptible connection occurred in Mexico and then Cuba with two older Cuban gentlemen that I met on separate occasions. The first was a shepherd extremely well-versed in world history, with a previous life as a military during the Cuban intervention in Angola post-independence war. The second was an insanely well-humoured motorcycle racer turned engineer then turned fisherman who tried to escape Cuba seven times until he succeeded, being arrested every time that he failed. Both were incredible examples of the quiet persistence that detaches itself from unsolved bitterness. The first man built and rebuilt a school several times after South Africa-backed UNITA troops bombed it over and over again.

He would go on to rebuild it every time, almost amused at the stupidity of men. The second had a simple goal and persisted unmoved despite getting punished harsher every time he failed. He wanted to see the world and that he did. This solid work ethic, will or freedom, coupled with grace in defeat and mildness in victory is quite uncommon in my experience.

The sensation of proximity with fellow travellers was never rooted in refined or sophisticated intellectual processes, but rather on sharing similar values and attitudes towards life – a taste for mild civil disobedience and to ridicule traditional stereotypes of power, a stubborn resilience in face of hard challenges, and a child-like enchantment with life. A piece of stone, an acer leaf, a star lost to a black hole, a barnacle or a tragic romance, all encompass the promise of endless conversation, with no particular hierarchy among them. It is this general lust for life that I found fascinating: a curious mind, coupled with the strength to test yourself (ideas included), and a willingness to share knowledge and experiences in a non-competitive way.

In your next journey, did your personal experiences in Albania and your professional experiences in international development help reinforce, inform one another?

Alba: Growing up in Albania to a family persecuted by Enver Hoxha's long-standing communist regime, I listened in fascination to my family's stories about encounters with the few foreigners who would dare engage with our hermetically-sealed country. One particular story was about a Frenchman who would visit Albania on business. He became a close friend of my father's. As possibly many families in our position, my family hoped that this gentleman might unlock opportunities toward a better future than the one we were destined for under Hoxha's regime. To no one's dismay, their hopes never materialized.

At the age of nine, I would look out of the window from my dormitory in Tirana onto a beautiful, large villa, occupied by just one man. I found it surprising; such a big home, and no one to share it with it. They're obviously not Albanian – all of our first and second cousins would have moved in. Apparently, it was the home of a diplomat who worked for one of the nearby embassies. "I wonder how it feels to know you always have a way out" was the recurring thought that would spontaneously pop in and out of my head.

It wasn't a thought that I cherished. I didn't want to search for a way out of my country. I wanted to feel empowered right where I was. I wanted to feel that I had the answers, or at least the tools to help me find them and the opportunities to execute on them. I didn't want to look onto the villa with longing eyes and a hand out for help.

Consciously or otherwise, these experiences helped shape my professional journey in international development. I had the good fortune to work across Ghana, Uganda, Mozambique, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Therein, I embarked on a path of advising small and growing businesses and the international development programs that would support them. Ultimately, my life's work became to help local entrepreneurs to create, cultivate and sow the seeds of their home-grown business ventures, the latter serving as these entrepreneurs' (and their families') ticket to better opportunities and livelihoods.

Entrepreneurs had the vision, ambition, and many of the answers. My role was to identify the systemic barriers that would choke progress and mobilize collective action across public, private and social sectors to help break down these barriers to accelerate entrepreneurs' successes. And, in the process, I learned thing or two about the ingredients I needed for my life's elixir, my eyes opened by the brilliant, innovative young men and women, whom I had the fortune to meet in my work, who were full of conviction, pride, and aspirations.

And as if I needed further hints from the universe, we're making our way to Band-e Amir National Park, Afghanistan's first national park located in Bamiyan province. Emerging from the rocky landscape, I catch my very first glimpse of a collection of six astonishing, mineral-rich, sapphire blue lakes that hypnotize at first glance. I sit in awe, jaw-dropped frantically taking mental pictures that I hope will last me a lifetime. Meanwhile, my local colleagues (for whom, this is at least their hundredth trip) continue to enthusiastically sing along, or rather jumble the words, to a song that was apparently regarded as a hymn in our local office in Bamiyan. "Wait a minute, what are you guys singing? This song is Albanian!" I exclaim as I snap out of my hypnosis. I was obviously excited. We're a small country; it's not every day that our songs resurface in an unsuspecting corner of the world. "No, it's not. It's Romanian or Serbian, maybe?" responded Mokhtar. "Të ka lali shpirt, të ka lali xhan, të ka lali zemër, o sa shumë të du" I sang

aloud as now their jaws dropped. Needless to say, I heard a lot more of that song (and taught the actual words) during my time in Afghanistan.

Point taken, universe!

Whether it's your first or hundredth journey – for work, for pleasure, for personal development, or whatever the reason – travel light, travel often and don't ever forget to go home.

My counterpart may have other advice on how to go about your travels – solo or accompanied, and whether traveling (alone) requires courage.

Tiago: Despite feeling a natural option to me, traveling alone involves a certain degree of audacity, leaving familiar references behind can be both a liberating and a threatening perspective.

Being a social person, with friends scattered across the world, I do enjoy sharing a trip with my partner and/or friends, but there's an unusual satisfaction in knowing that your rucksack will be your imaginary friend over the course of the next few weeks.

I have travelled extensively since my twenties, alone up to four months at a time, across Asia, Africa and America, with Europe being a continent to share with friends and family. I have had my fair share of adventures, but nothing required more courage than embarking alone on a Lisbon to New York flight in 1996. I was 19 and terrified of flying, in theory at least, since I had successfully escaped every chance to set my foot on a plane. However, a rare half-price promotion made the Big Apple even more appealing, and after a friend from university bailed out at the last minute, I ended up seated next to an old gentleman taking pills for his heart because he too was mortified of air travel. It was a blissful first crossing. I spent most of the flight ensuring my fellow passenger that airplanes were by far the world's second safest mode of transport, after the elevator that is.

Since then, I have flown in five of the world's ten most dangerous airlines, in and out of Lukla (unfairly considered the world's most dangerous airport); trekked in remote regions of India, Pakistan and Nepal, including 24 quasi-consecutive days across Annapurna and Everest mountain ranges; dived in submarine mountains off of Costa Rica with an insane divemaster who made sure I earned my ticket to an inexistent hyperbaric chamber; and to top it off, drove my 20 year-old Honda Transalp for more than 5,000 km

across Morocco and near the border with Algeria, sometimes at night in deserted mountain roads, not the wisest choice. None of these mild experiences comes even close to entrusting my earthly soul to that thin metal body that stubbornly defies gravity.

The perception of the dangers that lie abroad are often a fear-fuelled fantasy of the unknown. That distant reality is far more benign once you approach it at an arm's length. To this day, stepping into that first plane and venturing into the dentist office remain two of the most extraordinary acts of courage I am capable of.

Overall, I feel quite grateful for the fair share of experiences, friends and life lessons that travelling has provided me over the years. I continue to learn in every trip I make and in everyday I live. I learn from my girlfriend, from family, from friends, from strangers, from animals, plants and even distant landscapes. I learn at a slower pace than they all deserve; generally, at a faster pace than I can cope, but always much slower than what I'd wish. Nevertheless, I walk the line.