

A LIFE ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

EVERYTHING I LEARNED *Living Abroad*

*The tips, the stories, and the things
nobody tells you.*



LESSONS FROM A LIFE ABROAD

Everything I Learned Living Abroad

*Tips, stories, and the things nobody tells you — from a life
on the other side of the world.*

FIRST EDITION

An honest note, before we begin.

An honest note, before we begin. The "I" in this book is a gathered voice. Some of what follows I lived myself; much of it I learned from the many men and women I've known who crossed the same ocean — their stories, their mistakes, their hard-won lessons, woven together with mine. Names are changed, and a few of these lives are stitched from several, because the truth I'm after was never in the dates and the details. It's in what the years teach you. Everything here is true to how this life actually goes. And where this book brushes up against the practical things — visas, money, doctors, the cost of a month — take them as the start of your own homework, not the last word. Rules change, prices move, and your life is your own. What I can promise you is that the lessons are real, and so is the warmth. Pull up a chair.

PART ONE

Going

The day nobody hands you

I want to start with the thing I wish someone had told me at the beginning, because it would have saved me years.

Nobody is going to hand you the day you leave.

There's no letter that comes in the mail giving you permission. No friend who says, at exactly the right moment, "you've earned this, go." No clean stretch of life where everything is settled and the timing is finally right and you can step out the door with a clear conscience. I waited for that. A lot of us waited for that. We told ourselves we'd go when the house sold, when the kids were grown, when the knee was fixed, when we felt ready. And the years just kept arriving, one after another, each one a little heavier than the last.

The men I've known who actually made it over here have one thing in common, and it isn't money and it isn't courage exactly. It's that at some point they stopped waiting for the day to be given to them and they took it. They picked a date that was a little too soon and a little too frightening, and they bought the ticket before they were ready, because they finally understood that *ready* was never coming.

A fellow I'll call Walt told me he booked his flight on a Tuesday night after his daughter, who he loved more than anything, forgot to call him back for the third week in a row. He wasn't bitter about it. He understood — she had her own life, her own kids, her own noise. But sitting there in a quiet house in Ohio, he realized that he had been waiting, without ever admitting it, for someone to tell him his life still mattered enough to rearrange around. And nobody was going to. So he stopped waiting. He told me booking that flight was the first decision in fifteen years he'd made purely for himself, and his hand was shaking when he did it.

That's the first lesson, and everything else in this book sits on top of it. The day is yours to take. It will never feel like the right time. Take it anyway.

The first month is a liar

Here's the second thing, and it's a warning.

When you first arrive, you will not be able to trust a single thing you feel.

The first stretch is a kind of fever. For some men it's pure euphoria — the warmth, the light, the prices, the easy smiles, the sheer relief of being somewhere new — and they want to sign a lease and buy a house

and marry the country in the first week. For others it's the opposite: the heat is suffocating, the noise is constant, nothing works the way it should, the loneliness is enormous, and by day ten they're quietly pricing flights home and deciding the whole thing was a terrible mistake.

Both of those men are wrong, because both of them are reading the jet lag and the culture shock as if it were the truth about their new life. It isn't. It's just the disorientation of having pulled yourself up by the roots. The honeymoon lies to you and the crash lies to you, and they often arrive in that order, sometimes in the same week.

The men who do well learn to say to themselves, in both the high and the low: *not yet. I don't know this place yet. I'm not allowed to decide what I think until I've been here long enough to feel normal again.* Give it months, not days. Don't sign anything big in the fever. Don't flee in the crash. Just keep showing up, day after ordinary day, until one morning you wake up and the strange place has quietly become your place, and you can finally see it clearly.

I've watched good men throw away a life that would have suited them beautifully because they judged it during week two. Don't be one of them. The first month is a liar. Wait for the truth.

You brought too much

You will bring too much. Everyone does. And I don't only mean the four heavy suitcases you'll regret at the airport.

Yes, you'll bring too many things — the clothes you never wear in the heat, the gadgets you were sure you'd need, the half a household you couldn't bear to part with and then couldn't wait to give away. Within a

year most men over here have shed two-thirds of what they hauled across the world, and felt lighter for it. You learn fast that you needed far less than you thought. That's a small lesson and the country teaches it to you quickly.

But there's a bigger version of it, and it took me longer to understand. You'll try to bring your old *self* too — the schedule, the standards, the constant low-grade hurry, the man who measured his days by how much he produced and how little he wasted. You'll bring the habit of being useful in the specific way your old life demanded, and you'll be quietly lost for a while when nobody here needs you to be that man anymore.

That's not a loss, though it feels like one at first. It's an invitation. You came all this way — you might as well set down the parts of yourself that were only ever shaped by a life that used you up. The man who arrives clutching his old identity has a hard, frustrated time of it. The man who's willing to let the place make him into someone a little slower, a little softer, a little more present — that man thrives. Pack light. And I mean your soul, not just your bags.

Island time will break your hurry, and then heal it

Nothing about the pace here will make sense to you at first, and it will drive you half mad before it saves you.

The bank will take an hour for something that should take five minutes. The repairman will say he's coming Tuesday and arrive Thursday, untroubled, with a smile that suggests Tuesday and Thursday are roughly the same thing. An errand you scheduled three of into one

morning will turn out to be the whole day. Back home this would have sent your blood pressure through the roof. Here, for a while, it will.

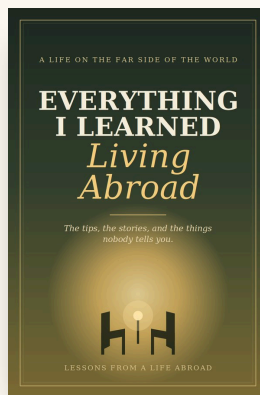
I remember a morning, early on, standing in a long slow line at a government office, sweating, furious, watching the clerk move at the speed of warm honey while my whole carefully planned day evaporated. An older expat in the line ahead of me — a quiet Australian named Ray who'd been here twenty years — watched me seething and said, gently, "Mate. You're not in a hurry anymore. You just haven't told your body yet."

That sentence rearranged me. *You're not in a hurry anymore.* I'd spent forty years in a hurry. I'd hurried through a career, hurried through a marriage, hurried my own kids through their childhoods because there was always something next. And here was this country, this maddening, slow, beautiful country, trying to teach me — through a bank queue, of all things — that the hurry had never been the world's. It had always been mine. And I didn't have to carry it anymore.

It took months to believe it in my body. But the day the slowness stopped feeling like an obstacle and started feeling like permission — that was one of the best days of my life over here. The pace that breaks your hurry is the same pace that heals it. Let it. You'll never get the rush back, and one day you'll thank God for that.

END OF THE FREE SAMPLE

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