

CHAPTER ONE – PREVIEW COPY

THE
EXOTIC
AND
THE
MUNDANE

One couple, a bold decision, and the
life-changing adventure that followed.



Joyce Dickens

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The Exotic and the Mundane by Joyce Dickens

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First Edition

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Prologue - Why I decided to write a book

It had been almost exactly a year since we returned to the “real world” when I realized that I still wasn’t doing anything with the stories, the experiences and the lessons from our 14 months on the road. In many ways I was letting them all die without seeing the light of day.

Sure, my husband Daryle and I had gotten together with friends and family to share highlights, but we rarely got past favorite places, least favorite places, a chronological listing of destinations or, for the really hardy, a brief recounting of the first three months. No one ever heard about month 12 or really much past month five. Mostly we ended up telling the same few stories over and over, even if they weren’t the best ones.

I kept coming back to the desire to share the overall experience. People seemed to want to hear, but the realities of busy schedules and attention spans, mine included, precluded a real sharing of the deeper essence of the trip. After dozens of cups of coffee and lunches, I’d come to the realization that we would never really be able to share our journey like that, in one sitting. We’d only ever scratch the surface. That kind of brief, superficial telling would never be fair to the experience or the audience. When I thought harder, it became obvious that realization shouldn’t have come as a surprise. After all, we were gone for 14 months – that’s 60 weeks; 426 days; or 10,224 hours! Why would I think we could cover it, or even sum it up, over a cup of coffee?

I also came to realize that a trip of this magnitude takes time to process, and that to a large extent, I hadn’t taken the time to really examine the experience myself. I knew I’d been changed by the journey, but articulating how, that was another thing altogether. When we returned to Colorado, we jumped right back into the town and life we had left. The

day after we drove back into town, I was at the store buying clothes for a job interview the next day. Within two weeks we had an apartment to paint and furnish and I had a new job doing roughly the same thing I'd been doing before. We were feeling ready to put down some semblance of roots again, and we were out of money.

I found that being immediately reabsorbed in the familiar life we'd left behind meant that reflection came slowly, in fits and starts, if at all. After a year, the stories inside began crying to be let out, not to be forgotten and left to die unheard. The process of writing this book has helped me take the time to examine the trip and its impact on me, to think about what travel has taught me and to keep those lessons alive.

By writing it all down, I intend to give you, the reader, the option to choose the stories you want to hear, from the destinations that are interesting to you, and on the time schedule that suits you. I've taken what seemed like an overwhelming amount of information, a seemingly endless collection of experiences, and fit them in to a format where they can be enjoyed in their entirety or in bits and pieces.

I'm going to do my best to write things as they really happened. I don't intend to make things up or embellish, but there are bound to be some errors, because if we've learned anything in the year we were traveling, it's the faultiness of memory! There are things Daryle and I remember completely differently, and aside from a few notes and 25,000 photos, there's no way to know which version is the real one, if in fact either really is. In all probability, it's some third option. But I promise to do my best.

Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.

— Ferris Bueller



1. How we came to take our “trip of a lifetime.”

In 2011, Daryle and I had been married for about ten years, always having the vague dream of “traveling more.” We were planning to spend our tenth anniversary in Mexico and prior to heading out on that journey, we were doing a lot of reflecting. I was seeing 40 rapidly approaching and Daryle was already there. Milestones like 10 years of marriage or four

decades of life have an uncanny way of making you acutely aware of the all too rapid passage of time.

We weren't actually getting significantly closer to that "traveling more" goal and in fact, we realized, we weren't actually clear on what we meant by "traveling more". We both knew for sure that this was no way to reach a goal.

Technically we were "traveling more," but it was clear we weren't meeting our own expectations or definition. We wanted more, much more. We'd taken a few two-week trips, we'd left the country a few times, but at this rate we knew we'd barely make a dent in our extensive travel wish lists even if we lived to be 100.

We realized that as with many things, there would be no "perfect time" and that now was very likely the best we were going to get. We recognized that we were at a point where we had to decide if we were serious about this "traveling more" thing or not. Get moving or let it go. When we took this black and white perspective, the choice became simple. Letting the dream go just wasn't an option.

"Are you more likely to regret doing this or not doing it?" Since Daryle first used this question to help me make a tough work-related decision, it had become an instrumental tool in helping me discern the right path, the path of least regret, by making the answer to tough do-or-do-not questions instantly clear. As in most cases, the answer here was decisively that we would be more likely to regret inaction.

We knew that to make "traveling more" a reality we'd need to make travel a real goal instead of just a dream. We'd need to define what our actual goal was and focus our energy. In fact, we knew we'd need to make travel

THE goal. We decided that traveling more meant looking at those travel wish lists, picking a handful of items and making them happen. NOW.

What we had was a desire to travel and a willingness to take risks. What we didn't have was a lot of money, or jobs that afforded a lot of paid vacation time. There were so many places we wanted to go and we felt like we needed to make up for some lost time. We'd gone nearly 40 years with just a handful of relatively small trips and the wish lists were long – African safari, Oktoberfest in Munich, learning to surf, and just getting out of the familiar and “seeing the world.”

As we looked at these tremendously long travel wish lists, we saw not just a lot of places, but a lot of faraway places. On the top of my list was an African safari. Some places are just hard to travel to for a short period of time, and Africa is one of them. We had already purchased a five-day safari at a charity auction, and we could easily have done a nice two-week vacation. However, if we were going to spend several thousand dollars on airfare and travel for 24 hours across a collection of time zones, I thought we should consider staying for more than a week or two. As I began researching, I realized that once we'd purchased the airline tickets to South Africa, it didn't actually cost that much more to stay for three months and hit Zimbabwe, Kenya and Botswana as well. On top of that, we could take time to adjust and settle in.

From experience, I now know that after making a trek like that, I want very much to sleep for about 24 hours and that it isn't until the 3rd or 4th day that I start to feel normal again. Once I threw in a few days on the other end to readjust after returning to the States, that was half of a standard American two-week vacation without seeing any elephants at all.

We knew we didn't have a lot of money to spend on a trip, but we were both at points in our lives where we were ready to make job changes. We started thinking that for us, maybe it was the right time for that long trip

we'd always dreamed of. I was going to be job hunting anyway, and I figured some time off to travel wasn't really going to hurt me in the long run. Sure some might hold the gap in my employment history against me, but I figured the employers I was interested in working for would see it as an example of a go-getter setting ambitious goals and making things happen. I knew it was a risk, but it was a smaller risk than that of regretting getting this close to actually taking the trip of a lifetime and letting the opportunity slip away. I firmly believe there is nothing worse than regret and "what might have been."

At some point in our planning, we realized that making the trip longer didn't add additional negatives but would afford us more opportunity. In travel you need either time or money; in many cases they're interchangeable. Since we didn't have money, we decided we could carve out time.

Basically, we felt that if we were going to quit our jobs and sell our house, we sure as hell weren't going to do it just for a one-month vacation. If we were going all in, we were going ALL IN. We decided to aim for a year. Honestly, I think a year was an arbitrarily long time - the romanticized ideal. Like everyone who longs to travel, we'd heard of those brave souls who "take a year off" and the idea inspired us – we felt we were up for a life-disrupting challenge. Not only would we leave for a year, but we'd also sell everything and decide later on "when" and "to where" we'd return.

There was one big difference between us and most of the "year-off" stories we read; we weren't 20-somethings fresh out of college and we weren't retirees. We were firmly middle-class and middle-aged. We had a mortgage, commitments, bills and a bit of debt. We had decent jobs we mostly enjoyed, a nice, if tiny, house in a popular college town, two cars and an accumulation of decent possessions. We weren't running from anything or dealing with a life crisis. We were happy, but perhaps a bit

restless. The only thing we were running from was routine. We were bored, discontent, too comfortable. I'd prefer to put it differently though, and say we were running toward something – a more informed, full and meaningful life.

At this point, we got specific and focused, and started working with what we had. We picked a departure date – April 1, 2013 - just over a year in the future. We started brainstorming about where we should go and figuring out how much money we reasonably needed to save. We started focusing every bit of energy and every cent toward making this trip happen. We opened a savings account dedicated to our trip; we stopped buying things we wouldn't need in a year when we were on the road. We started selling things we didn't use or didn't really love. We started looking for every way possible to stretch our money further.

We were in this hyper-focused life state for about 15 months from the time we decided to make the dream a reality until the day we left. This was long enough to be able to save enough money and get the necessary details in place to leave our lives for an extended period, but not so long that our departure seemed too distant or unreal. This wasn't someday, this was now and it was obvious from this point on there were plans to be made and there was no time to waste.

Throughout the planning process, I kept asking myself what I was hoping to get out of this trip. It's not that I wasn't sure about the decision. I knew without a doubt, we needed to do this. I just kept feeling like I needed to have some higher purpose than just "wanting to see the world." I struggled with the fact that I wasn't on any sort of particular quest. I wasn't looking to find myself, to recover from a particularly rough patch of life or to accomplish some ambitious task like visiting every continent. I hadn't lost my job or gone through the death of a loved one. I just wanted to see the world. I wanted to see places I hadn't seen, meet people I hadn't met

and live a life where every day was not incredibly reminiscent of the day before.

I was looking for the heightened sense of being alive that comes with breaking out of routines, doing things that aren't comfortable and letting a little risk into your life. The quote I kept coming back to was one from Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" It didn't seem to me I was doing all that much with my one wild and precious life.

Is it really ok for life to be fine, ok, acceptable? Shouldn't it rather be amazing, inspiring and exciting? I believe the latter and I felt like it was time to live like it. I wanted to know what it was like to live in places and ways that I'd never thought about. I wanted to enlarge my world view and my comfort zone.

And I wanted to see elephants.

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