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Posted on Sun, May. 3, 2009

Personal Journey: Around the world in 30 days

By Jenny McIver
For The Inquirer

Fittingly, it all began in a hotel. Away on business, I rushed out of my room, absently grabbing the newspaper on my way. Flipping through it later that day - travel section first, as usual - I noticed a captivating story of a man who had taken a leave of absence from his job, given up all his worldly possessions, and was about to embark on an open-ended trip around the world.

I was mesmerized by the possibilities of such a trip. If you had all the time in the world, where would you go? What would you see? What lifelong dreams would you turn into reality? But in today's hectic and uncertain world, could you really just give it all up and hit the road? Certainly, it's not a practical option for most. But I couldn't get the globe-trotting daydreams out of my head, and, within days, a plan had begun to take shape.

As the owner of an event-management business, I had no boss to answer to, only my clients. A year overseas was out of the question. While I wanted enough time to do such a trip justice, I also wanted a business to come home to. So, I decided on 30 days. One month to see as much of the world as I could squeeze in - and I was determined to make it count.

In the next year, I spent endless hours planning.

First, I bought an enormous foldout map of the world to plot this dream trip. I narrowed my wish list to 15 stops - an ambitious 30-day itinerary by anyone's standards.

Second, I booked the airline ticket. A longtime Delta frequent flier, I cashed in 280,000 miles for a first-class "Round-the-World" ticket - might as well go in style. Since such a ticket allows for only six stops, I used it primarily for long flights and later booked shorter flights to complete the itinerary.

Third, I reserved hotels in 15 cities, using every Starwood, Hilton, and Marriott point I had ever earned. I booked a day with an Egyptologist in Cairo, and a car and driver in India to make the four-hour journey from New Delhi to the Taj Mahal. A few stops required detailed planning, but for most, I simply booked the flight and hotel and left everything else to my whims upon arrival.

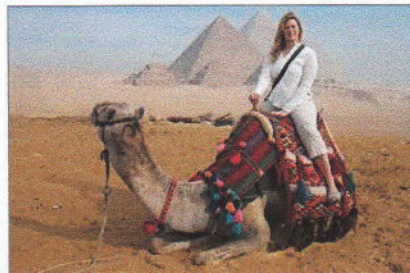
With so many stops on the agenda, checking a bag was never an option. I would travel light, with just the essentials - my laptop serving as my only connection to the world back home. I decided to keep an online travel journal, to keep friends and family up to date and to record every detail. I wanted to be able to look back in 20 years and relive the journey through my own words.

My first stop was Buenos Aires, where I strolled through picturesque Palermo Park and wandered the tombs of Recoleta Cemetery, lingering at Eva Peron's final resting place.

In Berlin, I braved the numbing January chill to visit the remaining sections of the Berlin Wall and stand in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate.

Cape Town, South Africa, brought warm, sunny days and an arduous climb to the top of Table Mountain for a spectacular sunset over the southern tip of the African continent. An emotional visit to Robben Island, Nelson Mandela's prison for 18 years, gave added perspective to the country's troubled past.

Week Two was dominated by the Pyramids of Giza and the Taj Mahal. I took in the wonders of Cairo through the passionate eyes of Nora, my Egyptologist for the day. Later, I sat high atop a none-too-happy camel for a ride through the desert of the Valley of Giza and a spectacular view of the Great Pyramid.



The writer atop her "none-too-happy" transportation to the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt.

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only day of my tightly scheduled visit. It didn't matter.

One budget-busting night at the decadent Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai was enough to leave me feeling like a princess. With a two-story suite and a butler to attend to every whim, the Burj more than lived up to its billing as the world's only "7-star" hotel.

Week Three introduced me to the colorful wonders of Southeast Asia. Thailand quickly emerged as a favorite as I wandered amid the gleaming temples and palaces and developed an appreciation for tasty pad Thai with a Singha beer for about \$2. The beautiful beaches of Phuket, restored after the devastating tsunami of 2004, were a welcome respite from the time-zone hopping of the first two weeks.

Kuala Lumpur and Singapore impressed with high-speed trains, high-end shopping, and high-energy city cultures. The bright lights of Hong Kong proved the ultimate place to ring in the Chinese New Year. And a peaceful early morning spent wandering alone atop the Great Wall of China left me wondering why I hadn't found the time sooner.

After engaging visits to Tokyo and Seoul, it was finally time to return home.

Looking back, I realize how lucky I am to carry an American passport. It's an all-access pass to see the world. And you don't need a year to take the trip of a lifetime. I saw parts of the world I had only dreamed of, met wonderful people, and got a glimpse of the lifestyle of a real world-traveler - and I only needed a month and \$7,500.

Jenny McIver lives in Atlanta.

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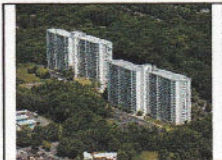


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