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Living the dream. By Karim Ladak.

Many dream of travelling around the world and yet very few of us do it.

Aaah, to travel. To learn, explore, unveil the world, understand humanity, have fun and adventure, let your hair down, take your shoes off, appreciate our differences, celebrate our cultures, unlearn prejudices, break boundaries, bridge divides, cure ignorance, attain a higher education. To travel is music to my soul and nourishment for my intellect, it is in my blood.

I believe our lives are shaped by who we are, by the dreams we dream, and the experiences we have.



I was born in Tanzania in Kigoma, a small town on the eastern shores of Lake Tanganyika. As a child, my favourite memories were of travelling on East African Railways to Dar-es-Salaam, a wonderful two day journey filled with anticipation, punctuated by the steam engine whistle proudly announcing its way through the African wilderness. The train made multiple one-minute stops, and I will always remember the sounds outside the window, ranging from “maskini mama maskini” a plea from the village beggars, and then in contrast, the high pitches of the fruit vendors yelling machenza, embe, ubuyu (tangerines, mangoes, baobao). People bargained through the windows and as the train began to move, the vendors ran alongside, hoping to get that last sale. However, I digress. If I were told then, that in my lifetime, I would see 120 countries and actually live in 10 of them, that would have been an unfathomable idea.

At the age of 9, we moved from Kigoma to Dar-es-Salaam, the capital city of Tanzania. Subsequently, I moved to Nairobi, then to Canada for my high school and undergrad, after which I studied Classic Arabic at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This is when that travel “bug” found its way into my consciousness. I was lucky because my parents had saved some “seed” money for to to get a house and I elected to spend that on seeing the world. Alors. I moved on to living in Paris and studied at La Sorbonne, then onto England for post grad studies, back to Toronto, and started working in 1984. Unlike most, I did not save for a car but saved to travel. Work hard, play hard. A few years later, off to Bombay

on assignment and then to Kobe Japan. Returned to Canada, only to move again, this time to Moscow, then Bucharest. A worldwide whirlwind spin in 40 years.

Sounds glamorous, but reality is that the decision to pick up my "life" and relocate to these foreign locations where I did not know a single soul was a very tough and bold decision, especially as a single gay man. Why tough? First, because over time I had built my own support system consisting of both my biological and chosen families, who were my backbone. A chosen family is a construct describing a set of very close friends. Hence contrary to what people may think (always easy for a single man to relocate), it is much tougher since unlike a nuclear family, I cannot forklift my chosen family. Second, in many of these countries there are no Ismaili mosques, no South Asian presence, no queer community. In fact in some being gay is a criminal offence. So in each of these locations I had to transform my lifestyle and rebuild it. Looking back, I have zero regrets since the learnings and benefits outweighed the risks and the emotional trauma. Moreover, I became independent, learnt a key life skill of living alone, and absorbed the accountability for my own decisions. I felt I gained a PhD in life.

Each one of these countries gave me different gifts.

Loved that experience in Jerusalem, travelled far and wide in Israel, understood the religious, cultural and political landscape, taking in the beauty of the dome of the rock, the significance of the wailing wall, the history of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the expanse of the Sinai desert, the philosophy of the Kibbutz, the vibrant corals in the Red Sea, that sunrise on Masada at the edge of the Judaeian, overlooking the dead sea, and of course a visit to the Sea of Galilee. I was the only non Jewish non IVY league non rich American person along with a catholic priest from Berkeley. Being a Muslim, this experience was eye-opening.

"If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a movable feast." - Ernest Hemingway, 1950. Paris is a walker's paradise and compels one to explore a pied. I wandered into museums - at the time the Impressionist works were at "jeu de paume", fell in love, had my first encounter with surrealism via Salvador Dali, understood perseverance through Monet's waterlilies and the emotion of stone via Auguste Rodin. The Latin Quarter discussions helped shape my understanding of the politics of the left, and how "Le Monde" saw the world through a French lens, where the centre of the universe was France and the French "colonies". Having been born in an English colony, staying in France was socially enlightening.

London exposed me to the vast world of theatre. The student tickets were cheap and so we were in the west end 1-2 times a week. What a treat!!!! The other unique attribute of London is that it is a meeting place. I continued to meet people from all walks of life, which is almost as educational and fun as travelling. The key is to reach out to people who come from different backgrounds and cultures and not gravitate to those who are like us. One must also get out of these major capitals, and explore the country. The people in the south are almost like a different breed from the people in the midlands or the north, and to appreciate the variety of accents spoken and the harsh reality of not being to understand some of them. Did everyone not speak like the queen? Seriously?

India was a spiritual journey, my roots. I did not understand why I loved South Asian literature and dance, why I felt so much at home, why it held an indescribable grip on me, it just did. People either love or hate India. I adored it. To contextualize the incredibly rich history, the architecture, the engineering, the advances in science, how this civilization has transpired and survived the British Empire, the sheer strength and resilience, wow! To witness the amazing sculptures and historic spaces like Ajanta, Ellora, Halebid, Belur, Khajuraho, Fatehpur Sikri, Konarak, Golconda, Dilwara Jain temples, Sanchi, all eloquently relay the history and culture of the land. Storytelling through art. In contrast, seeing my humble roots, in rural India, where my Dad and Mum's dad were born. People in these parts of the world live on little and yet are in many visible ways happier than what you might see on Sunset Boulevard, and no, they do not have a happiness index like Bhutan:).

Moscow and later Bucharest were my windows into Eastern Europe, a world largely unexplored by many. I fell in love with Moscow, a city you don't just see but you "feel". While Istanbul is famed for its Asia Europe divide, Russia is less obvious, and as Winston Churchill said, a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma". The more one explores the less one understands. Walking inside the Kremlin is a timewarp. While the jewels make your eyes pop, it is the architecture and the churches which grip you. A glimpse of the golden ring, even if just Sergiev Posad with its blue dome, or Suzdal, still intact from 12-13th century. Travel to Lake Baikal, one of the most pristine lakes, and going further east to Kamchatka. I remember going to the "Valley of the Geysers" and seeing those springs burst 30 meters in the air, those melting hot colourful puddles and the technicolour flowers. Mother nature has blessed this planet with such immense beauty, defies language and more beautiful than any Disney film.

I had now made travel a primary mission, visited about 70 countries and I knew I wanted to at least double that in my lifetime. Country counting can get a little silly if not done right but nevertheless it is a measure which most people understand. There are countries like Turkey, Costa Rica, Jordan, Morocco which I feel I have seen extensively, and there are countries like Kosovo and South Korea which I have just briefly visited. However, what is important is we understand some of the history, the politics, the culture, because travel is not just about seeing the sights, it is about learning and appreciating the diversity of this planet. On goals, set your own, they could be based on the >1000 year old structures in the world, or best national parks in the world, or oldest train rides in the world, or world wonders, just pick your passion. I know I really enjoyed seeing the castles and beautiful cathedrals in Germany and made special efforts to see them, example Burg Hohenzollern, which is a structure, a breathtaking view, compelling architecture and history all in the same space. A trip down the Rhine or roaming through Bavaria transcends one to another era.

Romania is perhaps one of the most "permeable" cultures out there, partly due to affinity for foreign languages, perhaps an influence of the exposure to many influences - Roman, Ottoman, Astro Hungarian. Romanians are life lovers and a refreshing reminder that we work to live and not live to work. It served me well as a catalyst confirming I needed to pursue an early retirement. I will go on a limb and say a lot of people are afraid to retire because of the fear of emptiness since we are creatures of habit. I wanted to travel and see more of the world, and volunteer for a purpose I can relate to versus pure profit. I wanted my own consulting business and spend more time managing my own investments. Despite



ice cold feet, I was able to achieve this goal when I turned 55. The toughest decision was saying sayonara to making more money, resolved that a person does not need to chase money forever and that there was a lot more to life than counting pennies. Easier said than done, but powerful and and immensely liberating.



I went nuts, stayed on in Europe and went south as far as Malta and Iceland in the North, glacier paradise. Came to Canada for 3 weeks and went to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, my first glimpse of those cultures. Back for a few weeks and then a mega trip to Australia New Zealand and the South Pacific, circling back through South Asia and the back through Qatar and UAE. Following that I went to South America, devoured Cartagena, Iguassu Falls, Galapagos, achieved my 100 country goal in Peru, loved Cuzco, despite giddy heights. The joke with my friends was that my return to Canada was an illusion, since I was never in town. Humour aside, I was living my dream.

What about travel do I find fascinating? I love the element of surprise and novelty. While pictures and travel logs are good appetizers, being on the ground is a different reality. Once I land in a new place, I always go for a long walk, without a map, roaming, following my senses. That walk is a “ritual” without a guide, trying to capture the full experience and emotion of the place, and take photographs. Photographs provide an immersion for me, they connect me to the space. Our media describes the world in very few dimensions, mostly affiliated with race, faith or country. Our world is much richer than that, not simply #hashtags and @twitter posts. When I travel and post, I aspire to reflect myself as a global citizen first, and refuse to subscribe to a few labels of identity.

I am grateful and blessed to be able to live the life I am. Many ask how I did it. Here are a few tips I might offer.

The first is an obvious one. **Save.** Create a separate savings account for your travel. Many parents save for children's education, or retirement, or a winter home, just pick your priority. If you are serious about travel, start putting that money away and seriously so. Travel is an investment for yourself and the people you love, not a discretionary luxury. Make choices. Eat out less, one less suit, skip that bathroom upgrade. Example: when I moved back to Toronto, I downsized my home and reinvested the savings into travel.

Be **bold** in your ambition. A "comfortable" goal will not force dramatic change, it will be incremental. Create your own path. Take calculated risks, specially when travelling to countries off the beaten track. When I went to Papua New Guinea people were worried I would be eaten!!!!!!!!!! As they were when I went to the Honduras (oh those drug dealers) or when I travelled to Bangladesh a few days before their troubled elections (do not go on the streets). As with any decision check your head, heart and gut, two out of three wins.

**Dare** yourself. Step outside your comfort zone. Example: I am terrible in the sun, hate heat, fear heights and have a half-functioning knee. When in Namibia confronted with climbing the dune, I felt terrified, 51% no and 49% yes. Ditto walking on "fire" in Boracay. That 2% needs to be worked, your "comfort lever". That feeling of accomplishment will make you feel younger and build confidence. I was terrified when I went sky diving, my legs froze at the door. Yet, it was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life.

**Do not wait** for the perfect timing. Think big, start small. Do the most you can in smaller chunks of time. Kill those voices which say "next year" or "wait until retirement". Once on the travel circuit, you will find a lot of help and support by meeting like minded people, we never know what tomorrow holds. Life circumstances can change in a heartbeat, best to do this when your health is in your hands. Start today. Waiting is a dangerous proposition, you might be a closet procrastinator.

**Travel smart.** This is not about what you pack, it is about how you spend your time. My travel consists of very full days and it is not unlike a working day. Spend less time travelling but make your days fuller. The nightly accommodation costs add up, as does the cost of not working. Find a local operator and make sure you get a really good guide. Yes it costs some more but it is like having your own "teacher" dedicated to yourself for a few days. Make each hour count.

A common myth that I hear is "it takes money and it is so expensive". I agree wholeheartedly, but money is not the only prerequisite for travel. One needs the innate drive, the motivation, physical ability, and importantly, that sense of adventure and willingness to learn, a modern day Columbus. A related myth is that some destinations are very expensive. True. But the Maldives and many other places have islands to suit all budgets. Buying snacks and/or alcohol at the local store saves tons. Qualifying for a platinum membership in your favourite chain provides enormous benefits and add up to real savings.

Bottom line is that travel is a life investment, imagine how cool it is to be meet just about anyone in the world and being able to speak to them about their culture and their homeland. The key to doing this is to declare you wish to do it. Will it. Will it and you will find a way. You can do it, and will never look back.

