

Outside of Ordinary: Women's Travel Stories

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Thanks to digital cameras, every moment of a trip can now be captured, stored, tweaked, emailed, and thrown onto a blog with accompanying anecdotes. But, as travelers often discover, it's the moments that escape being recorded that linger: the impossibly small lizard that runs across the churchyard in La Ceiba; the way an oar hits the water on Lake Como; even the sound of rain drumming on trailer home roofs during a road trip from the snowy North to the sunny South. These snippets of images, music, and tastes are familiar to those who live near the church or walk by the lake every day, but for the tourist they are, as the title of this collection points out, outside of ordinary.

In this swirl of real-life adventures, it's the minor, non-photographed moments that often mark a trip, and a traveler. Thirty-two women writers spin tales that are rife with amusing bits of conversation and sudden, unexpected images, and through their eyes, the glory of travel is illuminated. The editors are somewhat unlikely collectors of such stories, with Cecil being an artist, writer, and teacher and Bancroft a social worker who focuses on working with women survivors of trauma.

What they have in common, it seems, is their love of the extraordinary, and their hunger to see vistas that are far from their Canadian homes. In her essay about standing on a beach, "Separate Spheres," Cecil in particular captures what's so compelling about travel, especially for women, who are often caught in narrowly defined roles at home: "I was unhappy, restless, starving for change, for a chance to get away, to travel in search of the person I once was, so many years before, when I was barely defined by roles."

In focusing only on women's stories, Cecil and Bancroft are able to bring together a panoply of experience, but also create a few common threads that bind the contributors together. Like Cecil, many are at the age in their life when their children are grown, or old enough to grab the car keys on the way out. Their marriages have reached a comfortable groove, for the most part, and what's left is that bittersweet center of their lives, when the do-everything-now pace slows a bit and prompts reflection on who they are, and most notably, where they're going, both figuratively and literally.

With some of the essays, travel is only a backdrop, but its unexpected turns only highlight what's happening in the foreground. For example, lawyer Jeananne Kathol Kirwin's "Sundowners in the Cockpit" could have been a jaunty tale about a woman and her husband finally fulfilling their dream of owning a boat and sailing off into the sunset on a year-long sabbatical, cocktails aloft. But her story centers on a small lump in her breast, found far from home, and right before she's at sea. The beautiful way in which she brings these elements together, of losing her solid ground and wondering how to traverse this foreign world, says more about her character than anything she could have articulated directly.

In "Jaws in a Bowl," photographer and writer Jane Eaton Hamilton and her partner travel to Puerto Vallarta, but their minds are back in Canada, where a court case for same-sex marriage is in progress. While she eats shark soup, Hamilton ponders whether they should join the case, and her jokes with her partner demonstrate that even far from home, issues dear to the heart can't be wiped away by sand and surf.

Other essays focus on the sense of adventure that comes with travel, and the anxiety-producing but exciting way that plans can go awry quickly, opening up new paths to follow. Janet Greidanus, a chaplain, writes about Kathmandu in "The Hero(ine)'s Journey," and about hearing a fellow traveler's tale of getting ill with high-altitude

pulmonary edema. Hardly the story she wanted before setting out on her dream of trekking to the Mount Everest Base Camp.

From getting stuck in airport delays to hitchhiking to seeing fireflies for the first time, the contributors to this sweet, but satisfying, volume of stories show what the nature of travel is really about, and why photographs can only capture so much. As Bancroft writes in her elegant riff on why people leave home, “The act of traveling has broadened my comfort zones, altered my perceptions of myself—of who I am and where I belong—and enriched my understanding of the world.”

ELIZABETH MILLARD (August 18, 2009)

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