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

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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.

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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.

PART TWO

Living

The small money lessons add up to a life

I'm not going to give you a budget in this book — that's a different kind of book, and a thing you'll work out with real numbers for your own situation. But living over here taught me a handful of small money lessons that matter more than any spreadsheet, and they're really lessons about *how to be*, not just how to spend.

The first one: you will pay the foreigner price for a while, and that's a tuition, not a robbery. When you're new, you don't know what a tricycle ride should cost, or a kilo of mangoes, or a month's rent in that neighborhood. You'll overpay. Everyone does. Don't take it as an insult and don't let it sour you — just treat it as the cost of learning, and learn. Ask other expats. Ask your neighbors. Within a few months you'll know the real prices, and you'll smile at how much you overpaid at the start.

The second: a little generosity, given from strength, buys something money can't. The small store on your corner — the *sari-sari* store, every neighborhood has one — is run by people who will become part of your daily life. The tricycle driver who waits for you, the woman who irons your shirts, the kid who runs to buy you a cold drink. These aren't transactions, not entirely. Tip a little more than you have to. Remember names. Ask about the family. It comes back to you a hundredfold in a place where you are, let's be honest, a stranger who needs friends.

And the third, which I'll say more about later because it's important: generous from *strength* is the whole phrase. Give because you have it and choose to, not because someone has made you feel you must. There's a difference, and over here you'll need to learn to feel it. The men who get hurt are the ones who couldn't tell the two apart.

Small money, handled with grace, builds a life. Big money, handled carelessly, ends one. More on that when we get to the people.

Learn ten words and you'll eat differently

You don't have to become fluent. Most of us never do — English will carry you a long way over here, and plenty of men get by on it for years. But learn ten words. Twenty if you can. *Please*, *thank you*, *good morning*, *how much*, *delicious*, *how are you*, the numbers, the name of the dish you love. Just that much.

I cannot tell you how much it changes. Not because you need the words to communicate — you mostly don't. Because of what the effort *says*. When a big foreign man, who could so easily have stayed locked inside his own language and his own assumptions, bothers to stumble through

a greeting in theirs, something opens. A face that was polite becomes warm. A market vendor who'd have given you the tourist treatment gives you the friend treatment instead. You stop being a wallet that walked in and start being a person who's trying.

I watched two men arrive the same month. One never learned a word — wasn't rude about it, just never bothered, stayed inside his English like a tourist who never went home. The other learned to greet everyone in the local language, badly, with a big grin, every single day. Two years on, the second man could not walk down his street without five people calling his name and waving him over. The first man had been here just as long and was still, somehow, a visitor. Same town. Same years. Completely different lives. The difference was about a hundred words and the humility to use them.

Learn the words. It's the cheapest, kindest investment you'll ever make, and it pays in belonging.

The heat, the rain, and the night the power went out

The physical place is a character in your story, and you have to make your peace with it.

The heat is real and it's relentless, and your old-country body will sulk about it for a season before it adapts. You'll drink more water than you ever have. You'll learn the geography of shade. You'll discover that the locals, sensibly, rest in the worst of the afternoon, and you'll start to do the same and wonder why you ever fought it. The rain, when the wet season comes, is biblical — streets become rivers in twenty minutes and then drain away as fast. And the power will go out, sometimes for

an hour, sometimes longer, usually when you least want it to.

I learned to love a particular kind of evening over here that I never had back home: the night the power goes out. I remember one early on, the whole street dark, the aircon dead, the heat pressing in — and instead of the misery I expected, the neighbors all drifted outside because their houses were too hot too, and someone lit candles, and someone had a guitar, and the kids ran around in the dark, and a woman I barely knew handed me a plate of food without asking. We sat out in the warm dark for three hours and it was one of the happiest nights I'd had in years. Back home a power cut was an inconvenience you suffered alone behind your own walls. Here it was an accident that pushed everyone out into the same darkness together.

That's the lesson the climate teaches, if you let it. The place will be uncomfortable sometimes — hot, wet, unreliable. You can spend your years over here fighting that and resenting it. Or you can let the discomfort do what it does to everyone around you, which is push you out of your private comfort and into the shared, human, candlelit middle of things. Buy a fan, keep a flashlight, and let the rest of it change you.

Health is a thing you arrange, not a thing you assume

I'll keep this one short and serious, because it's the lesson men learn the hard way, and I don't want you to be one of them.

Whatever coverage you had back home almost certainly does not follow you here. The good hospitals in the cities are genuinely good, and far cheaper than what you're used to — but they will often want

paying then and there, and there's no one back home quietly covering it. This is the one part of the dream you cannot wing. You arrange your health *before* you need it: the right insurance for your age, the medications you depend on confirmed available, a clear idea of which hospital you'd go to and how you'd pay. (The specifics are exactly the kind of thing to nail down with a professional for your own situation — don't take a story's word for it, including mine.)

I knew a man — robust, cheerful, sixty-six, sure he'd never get sick — who arrived with no insurance and a shrug. He had a year of paradise and then a stroke, and the months that followed were a financial and human catastrophe that ate the savings he'd meant to live on and very nearly sent him home broken. It was not that the care wasn't there. It was excellent. It was that he'd assumed, instead of arranged, and assuming is the one thing you cannot afford to do with your body in a foreign country.

Arrange it. Then forget about it and go enjoy your life, knowing the floor is there if you fall. The peace of mind alone is worth every peso.

The bureaucracy isn't malice — it's a different clock

The visa, the permits, the official paperwork — it will test you, and the test is mostly of your patience.

Things take longer than they should. You'll be sent away to get one more document, then another, then a photocopy of a document you already gave them. An office that was open yesterday will be closed today for a holiday you'd never heard of. Back home this would feel like incompetence or obstruction. Here it helps enormously to

understand that it isn't personal and it isn't malice. It's just a different system running on a different clock, in a country that does many things more humanly than yours and a few things more slowly.

The men who suffer are the ones who fight it — who raise their voice at the clerk, who treat delay as disrespect, who expect a poorer country's bureaucracy to run like a rich one's and take it as a personal affront when it doesn't. The men who sail through are the ones who come prepared and come gentle: a folder of photocopies of everything, a book to read in the queue, a smile for the person behind the desk who is, after all, just doing a hard job in a hot room. Bring patience as your main document. And the genuinely important stuff — which visa, which deposit, which rule this year — get that confirmed properly with the people who actually decide, because those details change and a story can't keep up with them.

Treat the paperwork as a patience tax on a life that's otherwise cheap. Pay it with good humor. It's a small price.

PART THREE

People

The loneliness comes first. Then come the people.

I have to be honest with you about the beginning, because the videos never are. For most men, the first stretch over here is lonely. Sometimes very lonely.

You've left behind whatever web of people you had — the familiar faces, the old friends, the family who, however distant, were *yours*. And for a while you have none of that. You're a stranger in a place where you don't yet know a soul, where the language in the street isn't fully yours, where the evenings can stretch out long and quiet. Many a man has sat in a rented room in his first month, listening to a country full of life going on outside his window, and wondered if he'd made a terrible mistake.

I want you to know that this is normal, and that it passes, and that it is *not* a sign you shouldn't have come. It's just the empty stretch between the life you left and the life you haven't built yet. Every man who's now deeply at home over here passed through it. The mistake is to read that early loneliness as a verdict and run from it — or, worse, to fill it too fast with the wrong people because you can't stand the quiet.

Here's the truth on the other side of it: the people come. They always come, if you let them and if you go looking like a human being rather than a tourist. The neighbors. The other expats. The slow accumulation of familiar faces that turns a strange town into a home. It takes a few months, usually. Hold on through the empty stretch. Don't fill it desperately. The people are coming.

The warmth is real — receive it well

When the people do come, you'll meet one of the great gifts of life over here, and it's not the beaches or the prices. It's the warmth.

There is a hospitality in this part of the world that can take a guarded Western man completely apart in the best way. People who have far less than you will feed you without being asked. Neighbors will fold you into a family fiesta because you happened to be standing nearby. Strangers will go genuinely out of their way for you, not for any angle, just because that's the culture — generous, communal, quick to laugh, slow to leave anyone out. Families here stay close in a way many of us forgot how to, several generations tangled together, nobody discarded for being old.

The mistake some foreign men make is not knowing how to receive it. They've come from places where you don't just accept food from a

near-stranger, where warmth makes you suspicious, where independence means never needing anyone. And so they hold themselves apart, polite but closed, and they miss the very thing that could have healed them.

I knew a man, lonely and stiff when he arrived, who got more or less adopted by the family who lived next door — invited to every meal, every birthday, every ordinary Sunday — and who spent the first months awkwardly trying to refuse, to pay them back, to keep a Western distance. One day the grandmother of that family, who spoke little English, simply took his hand at the table and put it on the food and said the only English word she needed: "Eat." And something in him gave way. He let himself be taken in. He told me later it was the first time since his wife died that he'd felt like he belonged to anyone. Receive the warmth well. It is one of the truest things you'll find over here.

Keep your head and your heart in the same room

Now the hard one. I've put it right here in the middle of the chapter about people, because it belongs with the good things, not opposite them — it's the shadow that the warmth casts, and you need to see both at once.

You may arrive a little lonely, a little starved for affection, with a pension that, however modest back home, is real money here. That combination — a warm-hearted, lonely foreign man with steady income — is, for most people you'll meet, simply who you are. But for a few, it looks like an opportunity. And because you're lonely, you may be slow to see it.

It can wear the face of romance — a sudden, intense devotion that, if you look closely, rises and falls precisely with your willingness to pay. It can wear the face of a new "family" who welcome you completely and then, gently and continually, need help: a sick relative, a school fee, a small business, an emergency, always one more. The requests come wrapped in real affection, which is what makes them so hard. You won't be able to tell, at first, where the love ends and the need begins.

So let me give you the rule that the wise old expats pass down, the one that keeps a man whole over here: *keep your head and your heart in the same room*. Don't go cold — that would be its own tragedy, and most of the warmth you'll meet is completely genuine, and the connection is real and worth having. But keep them together. Be generous from strength, never from pressure. Keep your own money in your own name. Don't fund a whole life for someone you've known a season. Don't ever put a house or land in another person's name "for safekeeping" — men have lost everything, all of it, doing exactly that. And if someone's love for you tracks your spending too neatly, you already know, however much it hurts to know it.

This is not cynicism. It's the opposite. It's what lets you stay open — because a man who's been cleaned out by the wrong person grows hard and shut, and a man who keeps his head can afford to keep his heart wide open for the real thing. And there is real thing to be found here. Protect yourself precisely so that you can keep loving freely. Head and heart, in the same room. That's the whole of it.

You're a guest — so act like one

A short, important one.

You are a guest in someone else's country. Not a colonizer, not a customer who's always right, not a big man whose money entitles him to throw his weight around. A guest. And the foreign men who are loved over here, who build the best lives, never forget it — while the ones who are quietly disliked are almost always the ones who do.

You've met the type, maybe, even on a holiday: the loud foreigner who complains that nothing's like back home, who treats the staff as servants, who lectures locals about how their own country ought to be run, who mistakes a low cost of living for a license to be a lord. Don't be that man. It's ugly, and worse, it cuts you off from everything good. The country owes you nothing. You came to it.

The humble man — who treats the woman at the counter as an equal, who learns how things are done here instead of demanding they be done his way, who remembers he is a visitor in a place with its own deep dignity — that man gets a country opened up to him. Humility isn't just good manners over here. It's the key to the whole thing.

The friends you make late are a different kind

I'll end this chapter on something nobody warned me about, and it turned out to be one of the quiet glories of the whole adventure: the friendships.

There's a particular brotherhood among the men who've made this move. You'll find them — at the same café each morning, at the expat haunts, through a friend of a friend. Men from all over the world, all walks of life, who have in common the one enormous fact that they too pulled up roots late and started over on the far side of the planet. And

the friendships you strike up with them have a depth that surprises you, because you're all of you stripped of the old scaffolding — the careers, the status, the families nearby — and meeting as just men, in the last and freest stretch of your lives.

These aren't the friendships of your thirties, built on shared striving. They're something rarer. Men who'll drive you to the hospital at 3 a.m. and not make a thing of it. Men who'll sit with you in your grief or your homesickness because they've been there. Men who show up — and showing up, you'll find, is everything when you're far from home. I've seen this brotherhood carry men through illness, through loss, through the hard nights, the way family used to. Chosen family, found late, on a warm island at the end of the long road.

You'll think, perhaps, that it's too late in life to make real friends. It isn't. Some of the truest ones are still ahead of you. Go where the men gather, show up yourself, and let it happen.

PART FOUR

Becoming

The man you were at home doesn't have to come with you

Here is something the move gives you that nothing else in late life does: a clean page.

Wherever you came from, you were somebody specific — defined by your job, or your failures, or your family role, or some old story about yourself that hardened decades ago and that everyone around you helped keep in place. The man who was "the provider," or "the one who never quite made it," or "Dad," or "the widower," or whatever the label was. You wore it so long you forgot it was a label and not just *you*.

When you move to the other side of the world, nobody here knows the story. They don't know what you did for a living or didn't, what you lost, who you were supposed to be. You get to arrive as just a man, and

decide — maybe for the first time since you were young — who you actually are when the old story isn't running the show.

I've watched men bloom in that clean space. The accountant who turned out to be a natural teacher, beloved at the local school. The quiet one who discovered, at sixty-eight, that he was funny, the center of every gathering. The man who'd been "a failure" by the cruel measures of his home country and who became, over here, simply a kind and happy neighbor whom everyone adored — and who realized the failure had never been him, only the measuring stick. You don't have to bring the old self across the ocean. Let it stay behind at the airport with the winter coats you'll never need again. Come and find out who else you might be.

Patience stops being a virtue and becomes a home

I told you earlier that the slow pace would break your hurry. I want to come back to it, deeper, because over the years it became something more than a survival skill. It became, I think, the main thing the whole adventure taught me.

Back home, patience was a virtue you were supposed to *have* — a thing you summoned with effort, gritting your teeth, waiting for the line to move so you could get on with the important business of rushing toward the next thing. Over here, after enough years, patience stopped being something I did and became somewhere I lived. The waiting stopped being waiting. The slow morning was just the morning. The afternoon that "wasted" three hours hadn't wasted anything, because there was nothing those hours were stolen from — there was no next thing clamoring, no clock measuring my worth in output. There was

just the day, and I was in it.

I don't know how to fully explain to a man still trapped in the hurry what it is to be released from it. You spend your whole working life believing that time is a thing you spend, and racing to spend it well, and feeling guilty for every minute idle. And then one day, on a warm slow island, you understand in your body that time isn't a currency at all. It's just the medium you're alive in. And you stop spending it and start simply being inside it. That shift, more than the beaches or the savings, is the gift. I'd have crossed the ocean for that alone.

Home becomes a strange and tender word

Something happens to the word "home" once you've left, and it's worth knowing in advance so it doesn't unsettle you when it comes.

For a while, "home" still means the old country, and "here" is the adventure. Then, slowly, it gets complicated. You go back to visit — and I hope you do go back to visit — and you find that the old place fits you a little oddly now, like a coat that's the wrong size. The pace feels frantic. The prices feel insane. People complain about things that, after where you've been, are hard to take seriously. You love the people there as much as ever, but the *place* has somehow become a country you're visiting rather than the place you belong. And meanwhile the warm strange island you fled to has, without your quite noticing, become the place your body relaxes when the plane lands.

That can be a disorienting thing to feel — to be a little foreign in both places, fully home in neither, or in both at once. Don't let it trouble you too much. It's not a loss; it's a widening. You've become a man with two

countries in him. Most people only ever have one. The word "home" gets stranger and more tender for men like us, and that's the price and the gift of having been brave enough to leave.

Stay close to the ones you left

This is the most important lesson in this final part, and I've put it deliberately right here, because the freedom of this life has a shadow and I won't pretend it doesn't.

It is possible, over here, to drift. The distance is real — the miles, the time zones, the expense and effort of staying in close touch with the people back home. And the new life is absorbing, and the days are warm and full, and it is the easiest thing in the world to let weeks slide between calls to your children, and then months, until the closeness you meant to keep has quietly thinned into the occasional message on a birthday. I've seen it happen to good men who never meant it to. The freedom that's so healing in every other way can, if you're not careful, become a slow erosion of the bonds you'd never willingly have cut.

Don't let the ocean become a wall. Make the calls. Keep the regular times — the weekly video call your daughter can count on, the messages to the grandchildren, the staying-in-each-other's-lives that takes real effort across that distance and is worth every bit of it. You left to live more fully, not to disappear. The men who get the very best of this life are the ones who go *and* stay connected — who build the warm new world over here without burning the bridge to the people who made them.

I knew a man who let it slip, year by year, half by accident, until he looked up one day and barely knew his own grandchildren, and the

regret of it sat on him heavily. And I knew another who called his family every single Sunday without fail for fifteen years across that ocean, and when he was finally dying, far from where he was born, his children flew across the world to be at his side, because he had stayed their father the whole time, distance be damned. Be the second man. Go far. Stay close. It is entirely possible to do both, and it is the difference between a free life and a lonely one.

You went looking for cheaper. You found something else.

Most men come over here, at first, for the math. The pension stretches further; the hard sums finally work. That's a fine and honest reason to come, and there's no shame in it — sometimes the wallet is simply what gets a man out the door.

But the math is never what they stay for. Ask any man who's been here years what actually keeps him, and he won't talk about prices. He'll talk about feeling alive again. About being useful to his neighbors, valued in his community, greeted by name on his own street. About a slowness that gave him his own life back. About being, after years of feeling like a used-up afterthought in a country that had quietly written him off, somebody who matters in the place where he lives. He came for cheaper. He found *dignity*. He found that the years he'd assumed were just downhill from here turned out to hold some of the best living he'd ever done.

That's the secret the brochures can't sell because it doesn't photograph. The real payoff of this life isn't the cost of a beachfront dinner. It's what it does to a man's sense of his own worth to be somewhere he's wanted, at an age when his own country had stopped wanting him. You'll come

for one thing and be kept by another, and the second thing is the one that'll bring tears to your eyes when you least expect it.

The years you almost didn't take

Let me leave you where these things always seem to end up.

The men I've known over here, the ones near the close of it all, almost never speak with regret about having come. Whatever the hardships — and there were hardships, the homesickness and the heat and the bad days and the losses — I have not met the man who reached the end and wished he'd stayed put, wished he'd let those years drain away quietly in a place that had stopped seeing him. What they speak of, if there's any regret at all, is the *waiting*. The years they let slip by before they were brave enough to go. The decade of "someday" they can't get back.

So I'll say to you what the old men here would say to you, if you sat with them long enough in the warm evening: don't wait as long as we did. The day is yours to take, and it will never feel like the right time, and you should take it anyway. The life on the other side of that fear is realer and warmer and more your own than the one you'd have had by staying — not perfect, never perfect, but *alive*, and yours, and chosen.

The best years, for most of us, turned out to be the ones we almost didn't take. Don't let them be the ones you almost didn't take, too.

Pull up a chair was how I started this. Now I'll say the other thing.

Go.