

Travelations

the trip that opened my eyes



by

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 velvet escape



Standing at the edge of the Iguazu Falls

This photo exemplifies the immense joy I felt during my recent world trip. I had left my banking job and decided to travel. Standing at the very edge of the magnificent Iguazu Falls, I felt the cool droplets of water on my skin and as I looked over the edge, I saw the gorgeous rainbow at the foot of the falls. At that moment, it seemed as though all the pieces of the puzzle of my life had fallen into place and a whole new future beckoned. Like the massive falls before me, I realised that the future was going to be a dive into the unknown, but it was in my own hands and it would be spectacular. If I followed my heart, the future would be rewarding, like that brilliant rainbow below. The mix of happiness, contentment and excitement I felt at that moment was indescribable.

Wishing for a 'new' me

I remember staring out the plane window on my flight to Hong Kong at the start of my five-month round-the-world trip. The stars looked like a zillion little diamonds scattered across a dark velvety blanket. The half moon shone brightly, and 33,000 feet below, the lights of the Russian city of Novosibirsk twinkled like a magical fairyland. I pondered upon the events of the past six months and the steps that had led up to that very moment on the plane. As I sipped the delicious Sauvignon Blanc, I felt both elated and sad and I shed a few tears. It had been an arduous period that left me in a tailspin of emotions. I spotted a few shooting stars and made several wishes: I wished for a safe journey, a bright future and a new 'me'.

It wasn't because I didn't like myself. I did. I just felt that after having worked in the fast-paced world of banking for ten years, I had become a different person. Climbing the corporate ladder and striving to be a good 'corporate citizen' started to take its toll after a while. I looked on helplessly as I felt increasingly bound and my daily life became one big chore. Many aspects of my life had gone into auto-pilot mode and I was just there for the ride. I was tired of it. I wanted to renew my zest for life, reignite my passions and start to really enjoy the things and people I love.

Towards the end of 2008, the bank I worked for was acquired by a consortium of banks in what was the largest banking take-over in corporate history. My auto-pilot mode dictated a fight to retain my position and my team. I played my part in the political tug-of-war that ensued. I didn't like it but I felt I had to do everything in my power to protect and perpetuate my legacy. Little did I realise how naïve I was. Within two months, almost everything I'd worked so hard to build over the past four years was dismantled and replaced. I realised that it wasn't personal but all the same, it felt like a huge blow in the gut. I was offered a new position at the new bank but I was devastated. I faced a tough, potentially life-altering decision: to stay or to leave. After a few months of hard thought, whilst putting on a brave face at work each day, I chose the latter. I negotiated a deal and within a month, I was gone.

That was the easy part! I was flush with excitement yet I was terrified. Imagine the feeling: your future is wide open, it's all in your own hands to make something of it, and you have absolutely no clue where to start!

I started by taking a break – always a good idea if you have no idea what to do. I made plans for a round-the-world trip, something I'd always wanted to

do but never had the time for, bought myself a luxury round-the-world ticket, booked several tours and hotels in advance, and off I went.

On that flight to Hong Kong, I set several goals for myself; things which I wanted to work on during my trip. First of all, I wanted to 're-discover' myself through self-reflection. What has made me the person I am today? What makes me happy? What am I passionate about? These were some of the questions I pondered on over the course of the next five months.

Secondly, I wanted to challenge myself. I challenged myself to be open-minded and non-judgemental, less introverted and to confront some of my fears. In addition, I was accustomed to solo travel but travelling alone for five months was a totally different league! I challenged myself to seize this opportunity to learn about self-reliance. I also wanted to learn from the people I would meet and I wanted to pick up a new skill or two.

Finally, I wanted to just enjoy myself. This was my trip of a lifetime and I certainly didn't want to breeze through it like any other holiday. I wanted to experience all aspects of this journey, cherish each and every moment and most of all, I wanted to be inspired.

The catalyst

I didn't really give much thought to what I would do when I returned home. During the first two months of my trip, I was frequently approached by headhunters who had banking jobs lined up in Amsterdam, London, Zurich, Paris and Frankfurt. I figured I would simply delve into one of these offers when I got back.

And then everything changed. It was mid-September and the collapse of Lehman Brothers sent shock waves around the world. I was in Queensland, Australia at the time. I was just about to hop onto a yacht for a four-day sailing trip around the Great Barrier Reef when I spotted the headlines at a news-stand. Later that day, I was out snorkelling around the pristine coral reefs. As I swam in the crystal-clear water, among hundreds of colourful fish and corals in all shapes, sizes and colours, I couldn't help but think about the fall-out of that collapse. Almost immediately after the demise of Lehman, the calls and emails from headhunters stopped. It slowly began to sink in that my career in banking was probably over. That terrified me because I didn't have an inkling of what else I could do. It was a new challenge but one I was determined to postpone until after my trip. Over the course of the next few

months, I received many emails from friends and ex-colleagues about the dire state of the financial world but I paid little attention to it. There was not a lot I could do and besides, nothing was going to stop me from enjoying this trip.

Pushing my boundaries

I worked very hard on my goals. I attended meditation classes in Australia and in Chile. Those classes certainly taught me to open my mind and dispose of any judgements I had. I was taught how to breathe effectively to relax and increase my awareness. I also thought a lot about myself and my past, and about reconciling my experiences, skills and talents with the opportunities that lay ahead.

Challenging my fears was loads of fun. There were two particular phobias that I truly enjoyed confronting: sharks and heights. I was out snorkelling off an island in Malaysia when I was first confronted with sharks. Adrenaline pumped through my veins and I felt so much in awe of these beautiful creatures. Amazingly, by pushing ahead in those shark-infested waters instead of turning back, the fear ebbed as quickly as it struck. I experienced the same thing when I went zip-lining through the forest canopy in the Chilean Andes, more than 100 feet above the ground. After that experience, I wrote the following in my travel journal:

“Funny how fear has us in its grip in so many ways but when we let it go for just a bit and explore that unknown, we then realise how silly we were to harbour that particular fear in the first place.”

I met so many people who really inspired me in one way or another. I loved our chats, which were often in-depth – people tend to be more open about themselves when they talk to a stranger. I realised that everywhere in the world, people were basically all the same: they have the same hopes and fears, face the same problems and share the same joys. We may look different and speak different languages but human nature is indeed universal. This may seem like a very logical thing but to me, it was a powerful insight that really opened my eyes. There was a particular lady I met in Santiago, Chile. Her incredible life-story just blew me away.

I also discovered that I was a lot more extroverted than I led myself to believe. I guess travelling alone helped! I was a lot more approachable and I mastered the art of striking up a conversation when I wanted, anywhere and with anyone.

New things were learned every day. Travelling alone, I became very self-sufficient. I organised my transportation, accommodation, and tours; planned my budget; learned to keep an eye on my expenditures and cut down when I needed to; and became better at time management. I started to appreciate and apply talents and skills which I previously took for granted, and enjoyed this new awareness. When I felt pleased about achieving a certain goal or gaining a new insight, I gave myself a pat on the back by treating myself to a delicious meal or a divine bottle of wine! Every day was a priceless lesson.

When I returned to the Netherlands, I wrote the following final entry in my travel journal:

"I left Amsterdam five months ago with various intentions: obviously to see the world (or parts of it I've always dreamed of seeing), experience new cultures, catch up with relatives and friends some of whom I've not seen in many years, but most importantly, I wanted to use this time to reflect on myself and my life, and to get back in touch with the real me. In a certain sense, I considered this trip an 'investment'... an investment of time and resources in myself. And what have the returns on this investment been? I can tell you this much: this 'investment' has certainly broadened my horizons (such as identifying and confronting old fears, opening my eyes and ears to the fears, challenges and joys of others, and making me more aware of the intricacies of relationships between individuals and among different groups in our society in general) and it has changed how I think of people. It has provided me with invaluable insights into my person and my relationships with those around me. And it has made me a more positive, more balanced individual than the person who stepped on that plane in Amsterdam bound for Hong Kong five months ago. Haha.. yes, I've been working hard.... on myself.

Moreover, this 'investment' has allowed me to see the most stunning sights imaginable, from the magnificent Angkor Wat to the brilliant lagoon of Bora Bora and the awe-inspiring peaks of the Andes; meet the most interesting and remarkable people; do things I would never have dreamt of doing such as swimming with sharks in Lang Tengah and Bora Bora, and trekking across the desert in San Pedro de Atacama; and experience the sights and sounds of some fascinating cultures (that hot-air lantern in Krabi and that tango evening in Buenos Aires were truly unforgettable)."

Back in the 'real' world

I was back in Amsterdam, brimming with positivity and self-confidence. I felt like I could do anything and succeed. However, I was jobless and there were very few prospects of getting a new job due to the serious recession. In addition, I returned to Amsterdam in the middle of winter which, with hindsight, was a bad idea. It was cold, dark and wet. Moreover, I encountered some difficulties in adjusting back to my 'normal' routine, something I had thrown out at the start of my trip! Added up, these were the perfect ingredients for a depression, which I soon found myself slipping into. Within a month, I was fighting to keep my positive spirits up but I was in a downward spiral that was taking on serious proportions. My confidence was also taking a battering as my job applications went unanswered and chats with headhunters revealed the treacherous state of the job market. I didn't know what else to do so I fled. I bought a cheap ticket to Malaysia and I was there within a week. Being back with my family and friends, and the warm, sunny weather did me a world of good. I spent the following few weeks there re-collecting myself and coming up with a plan.

Starting over

Many things had changed during my five-month trip. The world had become a different place and I had become a different person. I realised that I was not going to get another six-figure paying job any time soon. I had to get back to the basics.

My greatest realisation was the fact that I had the reins of my future in my own two hands. It was like being given a set of Lego building blocks and utilising my creativity to build whatever structure came to mind, just like I did when I was a kid. Before I did that, I knew I had to organise my thoughts and ideas. I took out a blank sheet of paper and drew a mind map. I asked myself five questions: What are my passions? What career experience did I have? What am I good at? How much money would I need to earn to be comfortable? Did I want to start out on my own or work at a company?

I made lists of answers to these questions and based on these, I sketched a map depicting my past, my present and what baggage I had with me, and what my future ought to look like.

It was plain to me that I had two great passions: travel and writing. When I was going through my rough patch at the bank following the take-over, I launched the Velvet Escape travel website. Writing the travel tips and ideas

for this website was a welcome diversion from the political games at the office and I seriously believe this hobby kept me sane during that period.

Returning to Amsterdam after a five-month trip and faced with the decision of what to do next, I followed my instincts and decided to build on what I had started as a hobby. I added a blog to the Velvet Escape site and became a full-time blogger, writing about my travel experiences.

I didn't know where this blogging adventure was going to take me. I was inspired by my trip and I wanted to share this inspiration with others through my travel tales. Apart from my mind map, which I refer to once in a while for guidance, I didn't have a business plan. My main objective with the blog is to inspire others to travel and savour the experience. I figured, like my travels, other plans could be made along the way, improvisation would often be required and I might have to back-track once in a while. And that's OK. This trip made me realise that if you do something with your heart and soul poured into it, people will take notice and you will eventually be rewarded. I have great faith in what I'm doing because I'm loving every single minute of it. And I think that's the single most important lesson I've learned.

About the author

I'm Keith, a thirty-something living in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. For a decade I had a very successful career as a relationship management specialist in corporate banking; as an analyst in investment banking; and an investment proposal specialist in the asset management world. Like many, despite my success, my career had begun to feel empty. Through circumstances I was able to leave and take time for myself, never anticipating that the recent collapse of the financial sector would end my chosen career.

Not one to allow circumstances to get me down for long, I have created an entirely new career for myself, following my passions for travel and writing in a way that I'd never realised was possible before. 'Velvet' is the context I've chosen for my new ventures: soft, plush, rich ...some would say sexy. When you run your hand over velvet you know there is a certain depth and richness to it; you know you are alive.

Under the 'Velvet' banner I offer two lines of service:

Velvet Escape

Travel is my biggest passion and I've travelled extensively around the world. To me, travel is an opportunity to truly unwind, enjoy the different rhythm and to explore new places and cultures. It is also about meeting the locals and fellow travellers, and sharing views, ideas and experiences. In this sense, Velvet Escape is about getting away from our daily routines & exploring, being adventurous, reflecting & doing it in style.

My aim with the Velvet Escape blog is to convey my enthusiasm about the places I've visited through my experiences. I hope to inspire people to travel, to stimulate their curiosity about the world we live in and foster an open mind that is receptive to different perspectives and new ideas, as well as create a greater awareness of the environment.

Join me on my Velvet Escapes on: <http://velvetescape.com/blog>

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My expertise as a relationship manager and marketer combine with my hands-on understanding of the power of social media to provide social media advisory services to new businesses and existing organisations seeking to extend their reach. There is a world of difference between knowing all the things to do to create success with social media and actually having lived in the trenches of this powerful, ever changing technology.

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