

Across Continents: How a Nomad Found a Home

by Bianca Marais, for [Engl 3130 Advanced Composition](#), 30 November 2016

Dear Reader,

Today I face the daunting task of writing to you on the subject of myself. I sit here, twenty years old, in the tiny town of Johnson City, Tennessee in the United States, almost 8000 miles away from my birthplace in Krugersdorp, Gauteng Province, South Africa. In this letter, I will attempt to explain why I like to follow the wind, why I like to never stay in one place for too long and why I, nevertheless, love each place I visit so fiercely because each place gives me hope to one day settle down.

I have never lived in one house for longer than four years. Every time my father got a better job offer, or when we started feeling boxed in, my family would move to a new place. I grew up in South Africa. For the first ten years of my life I lived on the coast near Cape Town, but later moved to the North where I went to high school in Nelspruit.

Home is a word that my mum likes to define as the place where she hangs her ugly, abstract painting of a Jewish man that she bought when my parents were sometimes too poor even to buy food. Home is not necessarily where you feel like you fit in, but simply the place where you are content. To me, dear reader, home is a feeling, not a place. It is a feeling that, upon reflection, makes you want to trap the moment in a jar in order to enjoy it later. I have travelled to eleven countries, learned how to order coffee in many of those languages, have met people who were once strangers who could barely speak the same language as me, but have now become a part of my family, and I have learned to fall in love with places, seeking for that one place that could become the first place I associate with *home*.

I matriculated from high school in November of 2013 after working as a burlesque dancer in my conservative hometown of Nelspruit for extra money, went on a cruise around the coast of South Africa, enjoyed Christmas with my family and left South Africa early January 2014. This is the turning point of my life. This is when I changed. This is when I fulfilled my lifelong dream of becoming a globe-trotter, and for the entire time since the first month of 2014, I have been looking for my place to call home on this enormous planet.

First, I went to the Kingdom of Bahrain with my parents. This is where my father continues to this day to work as the equivalent of a minister of agriculture and my mum, a teacher. After learning a lot about the Arabic cultures and traditions, I began to experience the sensation that has been dubbed “island fever,” which is similar to “cabin fever,” which was basically just my traveling bone starting to itch. So I decided to go to as many countries as possible that didn't require a visa, because I was still just seventeen years old and would require my parents' signatures for every visa application to be processed.

After finding a volunteering agency that had easy, odd jobs in a lot of countries that I didn't need a visa for, I found myself in the southeast of Turkey in February of 2014. This is the place I picked to travel solo for the first time in my life. I volunteered at Bodrum Eco Farm, a tiny citrus farm in the Bodrum Province of Turkey, owned by a kind single father of two named Cem. There, I learned how to squeeze the juice out of citrus fruit faster than I have ever squeezed before, I learned to make condensed milk from scratch in order to feed my sweet-tooth some lemon meringue, and I learned that Turkish people love to eat bread with every meal. After filling nearly a whole notebook with recipes that Cem prepared for the volunteers on his wood stove, I moved on to Istanbul.

I, naturally, fell in love, because it was the first city and youth hostel that I've been to alone. I lived in the tourist area of Sultanahmed Square, located near some of the oldest and most beautiful attractions in Turkey. Istanbul became an embodiment of my love of travel and not belonging anywhere, but everywhere, in a sense, due to the fact that half the city is in Europe, and the other in Asia. When the man selling Turkish coffee on the corner of the fountain outside the Blue Mosque started addressing me by my name, I decided that it was time to move on. I then moved along to Tbilisi, the capital city of the Republic of Georgia. This was when I spent an entire day and night on a bus and caught a cold, all while being surrounded by absolutely nobody who could speak a language that I understood, but luckily, everyone understands a runny nose.

Due to some political strife in the Ukraine, I had to leave Georgia and went on to Nepal in late March of 2014.

In Nepal, I faced the biggest challenge that I have ever thought I would ever dare to take on – I trekked to Everest Base Camp in ten days, starting at the most dangerous airport in the world, Lukla.

In late April 2014, I travelled to Jordan, where I spent the first week of my stay volunteering with a traditional Bedouin tribe in the Wadi Rum desert. There, I learned how to rock climb without ropes, survive in harrowing heat and make goat cheese last years by rolling it in clay. I then visited the Red Sea, where I went snorkeling with a sixty-year-old diving instructor nicknamed “The Shark” because, apparently, he can talk to fish. When I was in grade five, I did a history project on the seven world wonders, one of which is the city of Petra in Jordan. Thus, visiting this ancient city that is literally carved in the mountains, I fulfilled the dream of ten-year-old me. Lastly, I visited the Dead Sea, which is the saltiest place on Earth.

In early May of 2014, I went to Oman. The volunteering agency said that I would be volunteering with a family to help build their tourism business. However, this trip ended after only forty-eight hours, as I found myself volunteering for a man, not a family, who wished to share my bed, not work on his tourism empire. After successfully coaxing him out of my bedroom, I planned an escape, with the help of my father who provided a plane ticket. Making my escape to the airport in the middle of the night, after climbing over my host who was sleeping on my bedroom threshold, I vowed to never volunteer alone ever again.

And this, dear reader, is when I finally ended up in the United States.

I was invited, by one of my trekking partners on the Himalayas, a native of East Tennessee, to come visit the Appalachian area. So, in late June of 2014, I waited on Charlotte Douglas International Airport for three hours – as I didn't have cellphone service yet and pay phones are no longer a thing in the twenty-first century – for my ride to Johnson City, Tennessee.

It is here that I found myself settling down... thus far, at least. I walked through the main campus of East Tennessee State University and absolutely fell in love with the almost-autumn beauty. I decided to apply for enrollment, and after my father informed me that we would be unable to afford the international tuition rates, I applied for a scholarship as well. Being accepted for both, I started my journey to becoming an international student in the United States.

The wind of wanderlust has blown me to this gorgeous countryside, dearest reader, and has introduced me to the wonderfully entertaining world of rednecks, American football, sweet tea, Nascar and all the fried foods that you can think of. I have faced my first heartbreak in this community of people that care so much for their neighbors, and I have fallen in love with a country boy, fit for a country ballad.

Now, in November of 2016, I am little over two years into my stay in the Tri-Cities area in Northeast Tennessee, studying Mass Communications and learning on a daily basis how to live like an American. I still get asked the silliest questions about how a small-town South African farm girl could have ended up in Tennessee, but the people in this area are so down-to-earth and hospitable, that I fear my tradition of moving every four years stands a chance of coming to an end. The winds of adventure have blown me all over the world, but have also landed me in a place I now call home. Yes, I just called home a place, and it is in Johnson City, Tennessee.

Until next time, dear reader, I bid you farewell.