By Dawn Padfield

*One-hundred ninety-three countries. Seven continents. Five oceans. Two feet. So little time. The urge to travel defines our human existence: to hunt and gather, to follow our "manifest destiny," to get away for the weekend. As a species, we are constantly moving, if not by plane or train, then by our dreaming and planning for something better than the familiar. For some of us, travel is a summer trip to Disneyworld, while for others the mere word "travel" conjures up images of backpacking through Europe or trekking through the Himalayas. Then there are those, the more adventurous sort, who choose travel as a lifestyle rather than as a two-week getaway.*

*Enter Violetta Zein, 27, a writer, photographer, artist, and Renaissance woman (and good friend of mine for 10+ years). Living in Paris, France at the time of this interview, my peripatetic pal has been moving around since she could, well... move around. In this recent interview, I got her talking about her travel experiences, her ideas about travel, her inspirations, and even what to pack on those extended excursions.*

**Where exactly have you been? What are your travel credentials?**

There are different categories of what constitutes "travel," I suppose. Some places I went to voluntarily, to see; others are places I transited through because of unchosen itineraries, such as Malta; yet others are places I went to as a kid and don't remember at all, like Germany and Luxembourg. Some places I saw when I was young, like Greece and Ireland, profoundly affected me; other places I stayed in briefly, such as Portugal, India, and Thailand, where the time spent is disproportionate to the

experience.



Some places encompass years of my life, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the US, France and Israel, and I know them much better. I suppose a lot of these places are cities: Australia, Canada, India, and Thailand are places where I spent more time in the capitols rather than the country, whereas it is the opposite for places like Madagascar, and South Africa.

I have traveled to Australia, Belgium, Cameroon, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, France, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Spain, Scotland, Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Uganda.

### Where did your desire to travel come from?

My family background, my belief in travel as something fundamental to human experience and personal development. When I was in high school—I went to a French high school where they made us read a lot of philosophy—I read the essays of Montaigne, a French Renaissance philosopher and well-rounded man, on travel:

> "Traveling through the world produces a marvelous clarity in the judgment of men. We are all of us confined and enclosed within ourselves, and see no farther than the end of our nose. This great world is a mirror where we must see ourselves in order to know ourselves. There are so many different tempers, so many different points of view, judgments, opinions, laws and customs to teach us to judge wisely on our own, and to teach our judgment to recognize its imperfection and natural weakness."

Based on that, I decided I would travel until I could no longer travel. So I did for

about ten years. And then I needed to settle down.

**What defines travel for you? Taking an airplane somewhere? A road trip? Spring Break in Cancun? In other words, does someone need to leave their country to be considered a traveler? What, if anything, distinguishes it?**

At its most basic, travel is simply an intent to learn through moving to a different standpoint. That's why a road trip, or an outing in one's city, as well as a retreat in Scandinavia, all count as travel for me. But travel is something that I've often felt when a period of my life was over. My big journey, the one I really consider travel, was an 18-month trip I took mostly for service in Bahá'í communities around the world, and with the intent of learning, encountering other cultures. It was to be my personal quest, the quest of my place in the world, of my identity, through travel.

I traveled to 18 countries alone, with few people to share in my experiences, and with less than a roll of film to show for it. Through the vast majority of my trip, I was trying to give back to communities, to serve them in some way, and the attempt to serve and be a part of the community in some way affected me deeply. There was never a moment when I could not care about where I was, or feel like my actions and my behavior had no consequences. "I don't have to behave the way I do when I'm at home" is a common embarrassing attitude that travelers exhibit. It stems from an observer status: "I'm here to *see*, not to *live*." If you're not going to be here three months down the line, and you're not meeting people who live here, there are no real consequences to your actions. If there are no consequences to your actions, you don't have to watch what you do or say.



**Talk a little bit more about your trip around the world. What inspired it? How did you create your itinerary? What were your struggles and triumphs? What would you have changed?**

I created my itinerary originally from a list of places I wanted to see and had contacted, places with possibilities to serve in various communities, doing social and economic development projects. Those who wrote back, I went to. I had family to visit in Australia, on my way back to the US. You, my best friend, were living in Japan at

the time, and I wanted to see you. I worked on dozens of different projects, from administrative duties, reorganizing the papers of small NGO projects that fought river blindness in Cameroon, or typing up the contents of some of the conferences that were given at the first ever colloquium on science, religion and development in India, working with youth in Congo, Madagascar and Mauritius on promoting dialogue about social issues between peers, helping write and shoot a documentary in Uganda, visiting and helping out at preschools in South Africa, as well as other projects. Helping felt like a triumph.

The struggles were two-fold, I guess. One was during the trip, when I felt at times very alone, and missing familiar surroundings, but so far from seeing them again. Even though I wrote newsletters to my friends monthly, it was nothing compared to the mass of experiences I went through and never shared. Even now, I play back moments of my trip that I am still processing, almost five years later.

Another struggle is looking back and feeling that I didn't do enough, or not as well as I could have. A feeling that I wasn't as useful as I could have been in some communities—if I had a capacity or training, or if I had prepared.

To regret what happened, I would have to regret what it made me. I can't separate the two, or regret the cause independently from the consequence. I wouldn't necessarily do it the same way again, because I learned from that choice, and I see things differently now.

### What inspires or discourages you about travel?

*Inspiration* is what inspires me about travel. What makes me want to travel is that person, that experience, that vista, that will carry me through darker moments, horizon-less moments. The possibilities of travel inspire me, the unending material to write about, the stimulation, the excuse not to take showers! I'm kidding of course, but part of it is something akin to that, the excuse to focus on an experience, freed from every day trivialities: paying rent, a doctor's appointment, your credit history, fashion, a new pair of shoes, someone's birthday, all things that take up time in your life "at home" and which you need not concern yourself when you're in a city like Mafikeng, or a village like Budondo.

Travel is my nationality, as it were. I feel it is more than an act for me, it is something that defines me. My family has always traveled. My father grew up between Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and the US, and my mother is French but lived the first part of her married life in the US before we settled in central Africa, where we have been living for the past quarter century. When you live that far away, and you

still have family in the places you come from, travel becomes a value. My family values travel like some families value real estate. It's not a luxury. It's something we do regularly to keep family ties alive, and something that is very much a part of our lives.

What discourages me about travel? Looking back on ten years of steady traveling, what I find hard to accept is that I have ten years of irreplaceable experiences, but none of the common milestones for people my age, at least the ones I'm close to: no ten-year job experience, no career, no husband, no children, no house, no lease, no property, no real home yet. I think there are very few people cut out to be nomads and travelers for their entire lives. I thought that was me, and then I realized I also need a nest, a home to come back to.

The other thing is that, after some time, why travel? You can't just sight-see if you're a person of conscience, at least in my experience. I can't just be a tourist in a place of need. And I get tired of seeing places. In some sense, I've seen so much that I'm a bit jaded. I am more careful about choosing a destination, because not so much excites me anymore the way it did when I was 18. And there is so much to see, it's already a losing battle, no matter how much you travel, you'll never see everything. And finally, everywhere is pretty much the same after you've seen enough of it. Of course, the culture, landscape, language, food, and so on, are all different, but that is superficial. What changes is *you*. Your perception of people, and the places; your understanding of the world changes. Fundamentally, people are the same everywhere. Good, kind, desperate, in need, happy, searching for happiness, looking for money, content, rebellious, miserable, noble, young, old, experienced, wise, dangerous.

Our attitude when we're abroad, and our readiness to embrace people and culture, and learn at every minute, is what we mistake for "being somewhere else" sometimes. This may just be a misguided concept of mine, but I feel like sometimes we travel to be the person away from home that we don't have the energy to be at home. Open to meeting new people, to experiencing everything with a new eye, to learning from every minute. Face it, if you had to be as alert and excited about life, every minute of 365 days, as you are during your $2000 three-week trek through Peru, it would be pretty exhausting.

**When you do you know, or feel, you have really visited a place? What makes it more than a tourist destination?**

When I feel like something in me has changed because of something I felt, understood or experienced. When I feel that I have learned something, then it was more than a tourist destination. But also it is the intent. Some places you go just to *see*. And that is what makes them tourist destinations. You whip out your camera and snap every moving thing, so that you don't even remember what you saw or where you were without your visual prompts.

**What do you think about books like *1000 Places to See Before You Die* that offer checklists for travelers? Is this forced, like a to-do list, or an incentive to get out there?**

I don't know. It's difficult to answer fairly. Some guidebooks are useful because they contain researched, hard-to-come by, and sometimes very authentic, information. Some lists like those can be downright cheesy. Or very inspired. It really comes down to a personal choice. I know I've made mental notes of places to visit when watching a movie filmed in a part of the world. I always check the filming locations at the end of the credits when I'm curious. Or a particularly inspiring book or documentary. But I think that we all carry around lists in our heads. There's a little of the John Cusak character from *High Fidelity* in each one of us. I know I have a list of my favorite places, and a list of places to visit "one day," and a list of books to read, and so on. The best list is one that means something to us, so I think it's a list that we make. Other people's lists are only ever mildly satisfying in my experience. I may make notes of what someone says about a place before I go but I never make it my own. I never take someone's word on a place I haven't been to.

**What places stick out in your mind as most memorable?**

Some places I have visited haunt me to this day: beautiful, mesmerizing, captivating, places that I close my eyes and re-inhabit, and visit regularly in my mind. Land's End in Cornwall, where the cliffs and round boulders tower over the Atlantic; all of Scotland, majestic, wild; the south-central plains and plateau of Madagascar and their baobab trees, and the views of Lake Nakuru as you drive down into the Rift Valley in Kenya. The French Alps and Yosemite. The Negev Desert of Israel. If I had to say why, or describe them, it would take pages. These are places I consider to possess great spiritual beauty. I am a woman moved by mountains, cliffs and bare landscapes.

**In your travels, what was your weirdest experience, most embarrassing, most sobering, most memorable, and most frightening?**

Weirdest: all of Madagascar was pretty strange. Eating the fruit of a baobab tree, listening to Texan country music blaring out of their buses. The landscapes.

Most embarrassing: Walking on a colony of giant ants in Cameroon. I think I jumped straight up in the air about four feet, and took off all my clothes in the middle of a field! The women clustered around me and proceeded to take off each giant ant that was firmly attached to my skin, and the rest of the villagers looked on, laughing and laughing.

Most sobering: Seeing a woman, all skin and bones, carrying a plate of piled and shaped cow dung on a round metallic platter on her head in New Delhi. It was early in the morning, in full Delhi traffic. I was in a little motorized rickshaw full of fumes from the trucks, buses, motorcycles, in a dense traffic jam, and she weaved in between the cars, a flash of bright sari, and then kept walking. They dry the dung and make fuel for fire with it, but that was the most sobering moment of my trip. It was a bit of a strong image for me, to realize, in that way, how hard people have to work to make a living on this earth, and what they have to do to survive.

Most memorable: Singing in South Africa. I spent so much time singing with villagers, I learned the repertoire of songs, including wake songs for funerals. I stayed there three months and attended about five or six funerals, and that was a wonderful bonding experience. That, and participating in the funeral ceremony; attending the wakes, preparing the lunch for the entire village, attending the funeral.

Most frightening: Feeling like I had been kidnapped by my rickshaw driver at 1:00 in the morning in a flooded, deserted town in eastern Madagascar. He pulled the rickshaw for a good 15 minutes into smaller and darker streets, and I got so scared I pulled out my mini-Leatherman knife and prayed and prayed until he rested his rickshaw down next to a dirty low wall, walked over to it, lay down and fell asleep. I looked up and there was a faint sign to my hostel right next to the rickshaw. But I was dead scared for a good 15 minutes.

**Now for some of the more practical aspects of travel. What phrases come in most handy when traveling to places you have never been?**

Anything that isn't a yes or no question. But if you mean in another language: basic directions, "Where is X?" and knowing right, left, straight, and the numbers; "How much does this cost?" and so on.

**You are off on your round-the-world trip, only allowed one backpack,, what does the seasoned traveler *need* to bring along? What is necessary or unnecessary?**

I have always sucked at packing. There are fantastic web sites out there that I just discovered that practically pack for you. But I like a couple of family photos, a Swiss army knife or Leatherman, a flashlight, toothbrush and toothpaste, towel, soap, a sleeping bag, pen and notebook, mosquito repellent or sunscreen, something to read in your own language (preferably about the place). The less you bring, the happier you are, in the end. Basic toiletries, comfortable shoes, and a change of clothes.

**Best and worst airlines to travel with?**

Worst would have to be Aeroflot in 1992. The seats in front would fold over if you pushed them and some seat belts didn't work. When we landed in Moscow the crew

uncorked the vodka. I'm not kidding! Best: my one-hour visit in first class from Sydney to Auckland on Qantas. They bumped me up as a favor because the flight was overbooked.

**When do you start to feel comfortable in a place? For me, for example, when I figure out the bus/public transport system in a new place, I feel invincible and can enjoy the rest of my stay, up until that point I am a stress mess. For you?**

Same. When I know my way around and know the basic information in the local language. If I can give directions, order fruit juice and answer the time, ask and understand the price of something, and answer simple questions, I feel pretty comfortable.

**Finally, why travel?**

It gives you perspective. And perspective is so necessary to being just in your views of things, it helps you get closer to truth I feel. The more you travel the less you're tied down by one or the other perspective and the more your vision is world embracing, respectful, open-minded. It gives you a new eye on things, people, yourself, life, home. Even when you don't travel, you can have that "foreigner's perspective" on what happens at home. If you are familiar with how things are somewhere else, you don't see things the same way as someone who has never left the city or the country. You have a point of comparison. And that is priceless. You can call on it again and again. Then again, you have those who travel just to prove to themselves or just to find out that they're better at home. But even they learn something from the trip! ◉