



Out and About
Journeys Completed or Contemplated

ZANZIBAR

THE NAME CASTS A SPELL

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*What is it about the names of certain places?
Why do they carry such weight and make us long to be there?*

It took about eight weeks to prepare for my trip to East Africa. I had to send my passport off for a visa and get a lot of shots. There were a few odds and ends that I needed. Extra-strength bug repellent. Sunscreen. The right hat; one that would not blow off in the safari rig. While running these errands, I'd tell people what I was up to and where I was going. A flight to Nairobi. Over land into Tanzania. Then, for the last few days of the trip, Zanzibar.

The reaction was always the same — 100% of the time. I would say the word “Zanzibar,” and whomever I was talking to would breathe in, al-

most the same kind of breath you take when you set a perfect, fragrant desert on the table. They would gasp, just slightly, and then lean back and stare past the top of my head. “Zanzibar,” they would echo. “Zanzibar...” And they would drift into silence while I watched them disappear into their own ideas of that place.

It was the name of the place that made me want to go there in the first place. Before I started to prepare for the trip, I knew nothing of Zanzibar. Really, nothing. I'm not sure that I could have found it on a map if you'd asked me to. I'd have looked, I think, in the Persian Gulf and been wrong.

I'd have thought we were talking of Madagascar, another place with a name that makes my focus shift to that imaginary map where every place has a name that sounds like a mix of music and honey and red dirt. It didn't matter that I did not know the place; the name was enough to make me want to go there. Zanzibar! Of course I wanted to go. I had said it out loud.

Timbuktu and Isfahan and Ulan Bator ... the sound of those names makes my brain itch and my wallet feel much too thin. I know that the Atacama is a high desert in South America, but that's really all I know — well, also that the name puts my less earthbound

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self into a rented jeep and drives me out into a night filled with wind and stars. Lhasa — just say the name, Lhasa, and there are butter tea lamps and political complications and a low, vibrating chant. I can feel the sound of it just below my solar plexus, pulling me toward the Himalayas.

These are real places. They exist here on our planet. Places that are named Angkor Wat and Borobudur and, oh, in the city of Granada in Spain there is the Alhambra, the Red Fortress. Cappadocia, even the word feels like it was carved from stone as I form it in my mouth, picturing geology turned into dwellings. The names of these places

draw my nose closer to the map. They cause me to reconsider every choice I have made while I think, yes, I could sell the house and go to Lalibela and Axum, in Ethiopia, because, well, the name called me, like a spell. If I made the mistake of saying it out loud, “Lalibela,” there would be nothing left to do but go to Lalibela.

I don't understand what it is about the names of these places. Why do they carry such weight, especially when I know nothing of them? Do they have too many vowels? Are the underused consonants an indication of otherworldliness? Rajasthan, Astrakhan: I can imagine their rhyming for-

mer palaces wrapped in complicated textiles that arrived by yak or camel train. I drink them down with spiced tea. All these place names build their temporary empires in my imagination, and I'm swept up in a completely fabricated vision of what the words mean.

You feel it too; I see it. I say to you, “Zanzibar,” and the spell spreads. You hear the name of the place, and it's enough. It is the sound of a fairy tale, the sound of once upon a time in a land far, far away. You say the name, and then, you go. ♦