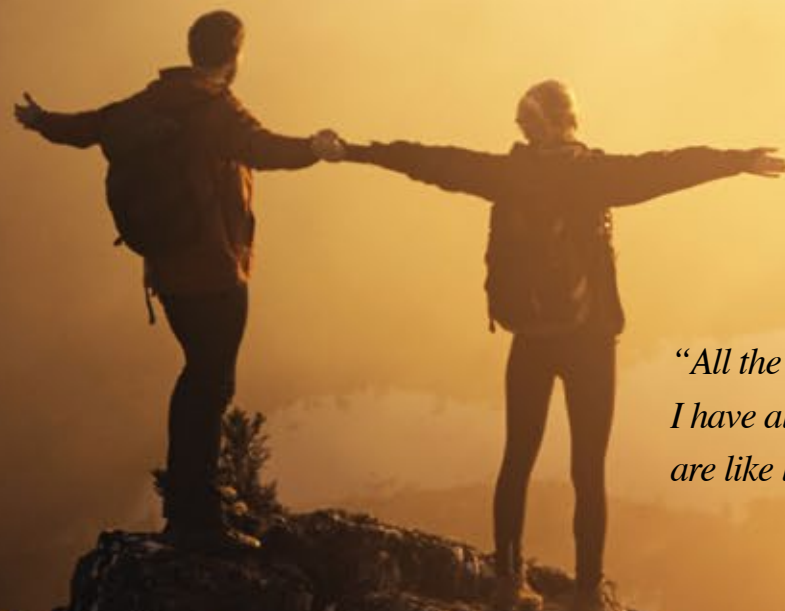


# Heart-Shaped Map

Why is it so easy to fall in love away from home?



*“All the best journeys, I have always felt, are like love affairs ...”*

by Pam Mandel  
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We joke that we met on a reality TV show, but the truth is just as unlikely. He showed up at sunset at Ayers Rock, and I recognized him right away as the person who'd come for my heart. He doesn't talk much, but when he does, he says it was the same for him. Neither of us is from Australia, but there we were in the golden hour light at that place and time, open to whatever was going to happen. That was more than 20 years ago. We're still married, and now we share a house and a dog and a life in Seattle.

What is it about traveling that cracks open the hard shell of our hearts and makes it easy to fall in love? And this falling, it's more than your cartoony summer romance — and it's not just with people; it's with place too. The relentlessly informal fall in love with Viennese cafes and their tuxedoed waiters. The most committed of night owls will rise at dawn to hear the call to prayer be swept across the rooftops and up into the rising light of a Cairo dawn. A Type A overachiever steps out into the chaos of Hanoi and finds joy in noise of scooters piled high with merchandise, shop fronts uncontained, spilling their merchandise out into the sidewalks, the mess such that they have to step off the high curbs into the street, laughing about a situation that would enrage them back home.

Poetic travel writer Pico Lyer wrote: “All the best journeys, I have always felt, are like love affairs, not least because they turn you inside out and leave you within a darkness where you can't tell right from left or good from bad. And all love affairs are like jour-

neys, deep into a foreign country, where you can't read the signs, and you don't know the language and you are drawn into a wilderness alive with mystery and possibility, and the knowledge — certain knowledge — that who you were is irretrievable.” (Lyer, 2000)

Inveterate traveler friends agree that there's a romance in travel that they find nowhere else in their lives. Single or in committed relationships, it doesn't matter. Once set free from their home lives, they find a depth of feeling in their adventures that feels like falling in love.

“The structures of your everyday are stripped away, and with it some of the assumptions about who you are and how you do life,” says my friend Tara. “It's like your protective coating is the thinnest it's ever going to be. So yeah, it's easy for things to get closer than they would at home when we're fully ensconced in our lives and habits and ideas about who we are and how things work.”

There's the implied pressure of time too. We have 48 hours. Ten days. Maybe we're lucky and have three weeks to let a place and its people into our hearts. How much richer are our experiences when we act as though we are already open to loving the madness of places and people we don't understand? How much better our adventures become if instead of being confounded by the new and unknown, we decide to embrace it in all its messy glory.

It is not for cowards, this breaking our hearts open to the unfamiliar. But when I think back on my own travels, I am grateful even for the sadness that overwhelms

me as I feel the plane lift from the tarmac. I leaned my head on the oval window and cried as the Big Island of Hawaii got smaller and smaller, disappearing into the Pacific at the same rate my plane disappeared into the sky. I was devastated upon leaving Mississippi after road tripping solo through the Delta. That noisy apartment in the East Village, it would never do, but still I lingered before dropping the key back in the mailbox. Could we not somehow work out an arrangement? Surely my Seattle home would understand.

English is a poor tool for encapsulating this feeling. There's wanderlust, the need to roam. That's not quite it; though it's handy it's got the word “lust” in there. There's *fernweh*, the German version, which means a desire for faraway places. I like the Portuguese word, *saudade*, because it includes both nostalgia and melancholy, but it's not a feeling we should avoid — it's one to be embraced.

I think of it as a bit of heartbreak combined with the knowledge that whatever it was you fell for — the smell of seaweed on the Spanish beach, the cranberry color of the Alaskan tundra, or the hands of that Hawaiian aunty flying across the strings of her ukulele — are not yours to keep. They're yours for the moment only, and then they become memories of that time you gave your heart to the world. Again. ♦

**Read more:**

Lyer, Pico. (2000). “Why We Travel.” Retrieved July 11, 2018, from [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com).