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Traveling with the Virtual Wayfarer

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Submitted by Dr. Jessie Voigts on Fri, 08/26/2011 - 17:04 Traveling Geographic

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Life is all about change - and the difference is whether we embrace it, or not. Travel - and intercultural experiences - is just that - change. One global traveler who is embracing all that life - and the world - has to offer is Alex Berger, publisher of VirtualWayfarer.



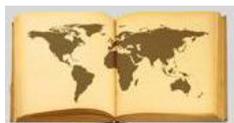
Alex in Patagonia

We were lucky enough to catch up with Alex, and chat about his site, travels, study abroad, and taking the opportunities life has to offer. Here's what he had to say...

WE: Please tell us about VirtualWayfarer...

AB: VirtualWayfarer is my flagship travel blog focused on photo and video-rich narrative posts cataloging my travels. These posts are supplemented by travel advice, tips and tricks I've learned firsthand on the road.

VirtualWayfarer is my primary site but I have also spun off several posts into stand-alone websites dedicated to the needs of my readers. My aim is to simplify quality information for novice and intermediate travelers through extremely simple resource sites.



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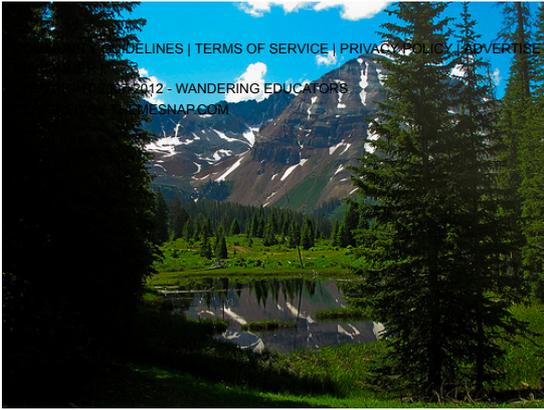
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WE: *What was the genesis of your site?*

AB: VirtualWayfarer sprang to life in July 2007 as I prepared for my first solo multi-month trip. Having just graduated from Arizona State University, I wanted an easy way to journal about the three-month trip, while at the same time updating family and friends in a timely manner from the road. It started out as a personal blog where I focused heavily on travel, but also included general musings about education, startups, technology and millennials. Over the last three years I have focused more exclusively on travel and as a result VirtualWayfarer has grown to become one of the top single-authored independent travel blogs.

That trip was an incredible experience. It took my existing passion for travel and ignited it. I returned from the trip in December 2007. In January, I began a new career as an Analyst in Business Sales, Mergers and Acquisitions. The job offered a flexible work schedule which allowed me to take 18-20 day trips every six months. By budgeting my time off and finances carefully I visited Ireland, Scotland, Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, Argentina, Denmark, Germany, Spain and Norway between 2008 and early 2011.

In June of 2011 I resigned from my position as Director of Research to accept a scholarship and position as a Masters student at the University of Copenhagen, studying Communication and Cognition. While I am currently focusing on launching my studies, I will continue to expand VirtualWayfarer, sharing exciting travel stories, photos, travel advice and guidance.



Washington, DC



End of the World

WE: You've just embarked on a new adventure - can you please share more about studying in Copenhagen?

AB: After spending several years in the corporate world I found myself missing the University environment. I was already spending a significant portion of my spare time researching social media, distance learning, virtual worlds and the impact of the web on travel culture so I figured why not convert that research into continuing education? I applied to several programs and it eventually came down to a choice between Georgetown and the University of Copenhagen. Copenhagen provided the opportunity to live/study abroad and offered me a tuition waiver to sweeten the deal. As great as Georgetown is, Copenhagen's allure made it a no brainer.

It's incredible, the University of Copenhagen was founded in 1479 – that's right, it pre-dates Columbus' "discovery" of America. The University is also a member of the International Alliance of Research Universities which includes Cambridge, Oxford, Yale and others among its 10 member schools. The city of Copenhagen has just over 500,000 citizens and the greater metro area just under 1.9 million making it a relatively small capital city. The architecture is absolutely stunning and the city's city center has a wealth of character with vibrantly painted stone buildings, beautiful cobblestone streets and incredible canals and harbors that I find remind me of Amsterdam. The city is also one of the most bicycle friendly cities I've ever seen. With a heavy cultural focus on clean technology and healthy lifestyles, there is a 180% tax on the purchase of a new car. While shocking, this tax helps offset overpopulation and encourages use of public transportation. The relatively small size of the city and bike friendly nature of the metro also makes it easy to move around.

The Danes have a reputation for being slightly more reserved than some cultures, when not out celebrating. However, "reserved" doesn't do them justice. Once engaged in conversation, they are some of the most helpful and friendly people I've ever met. There is an innate sincerity in most of the Danes I've interacted with which is rare anywhere, and almost unheard of in a capital city.



Tierra del Fuego National Park, Argentina



Hiking Perito Moreno Glacier - Patagonia, Argentina

WE: What led you to choose to pursue an MA in Denmark?

AB: I'm a strong believer that a key part of the continuing educational process is the development of highly capable, intelligent, productive, and passionate peer groups. The chance to expand my social and professional network internationally by living and studying abroad is incredibly enticing. Denmark also offered the opportunity to study at one of the top 50 Universities in the world, in a country that has shown a strong commitment to investing in education.

By choosing to pursue my Masters in Denmark, I've chosen to spend the next two years exploring leading edge educational research while challenging myself in new and exciting ways. In my short time here, this move has already given me fantastic new insights into what is important to me and how the world around me operates. It continues to be an incredibly eye-opening experience!



The Bridge in Smoo Cave, Scotland

WE: How can travelers best dig deeply into a culture/new place?

AB: Get lost. It's so easy to shuffle from point A to point B, even experienced travelers often find themselves missing out on the true cultural depth of their destinations. Especially if they never leave the tourist infrastructure. I always try and set aside time to wander aimlessly allowing myself to explore areas, restaurants and foods that aren't part of the standard tourist itinerary. Don't stop there though, and never underestimate the power of simple, friendly questions. The next time you find yourself at a small off beat café along a random side street turn to the people at the table next to you and ask them for recommendations about food, music, places to visit – anything and everything! Embrace your ignorance, confess it, and encourage them to enlighten you!

Another trick is to say yes to uncomfortable invitations (when they're safe). Most of my best experiences would never have happened if I refused the initial invitation. People love to include travelers in things, the catch is that those invitations aren't always the status quo and may not align with your pre-existing itinerary. So what! If the opportunity is safe, but outside your comfort zone, learn NOT to politely reject it. Override your excuses and go for it! These chances may be something as simple as a late night invitation to a speakeasy, or something as involved as renting a car to snorkel cenotes (flooded caves). Saying "yes" has introduced me to both and left me with the memories of a lifetime as souvenirs.

My third tip is to use Couchsurfing to meet locals or expats at your destination. While people always assume that couchsurfing is all about a free place to stay, the site's real value is in connecting travelers and locals for coffee, a drink, or a walking tour. It makes connecting with people easy, much safer, and can be an absolute blast. Every traveler should have an account and take advantage of its incredible social potential.



Sailing the Barrier Reef - Belize



Avoca, Ireland

WE: *What are your expectations for your MA? Where will it lead you?*

AB: I honestly don't know, and that's what I love about it! As I gear up to return to the academic world there's only one certainty – that I'll be a vastly different person two years from now. I can't wait to see what revelations I have over the next two years as I learn what it is like to truly live abroad, explore exciting new topics and technologies through my masters while meeting people who will influence my passions and worldview. My hope is that it will be a period of incredible growth, combined with regular opportunities to travel and, ultimately, set me up to continue my research with a PhD. A travel or distance education themed startup is also well within the realm of the possible.



The Warehouse District - Bergen, Norway

WE: *Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?*

AB: It took me a long time before I had the gusto to even entertain the idea of moving abroad to study. In truth, even when I got confirmation of my acceptance I wasn't sure if I had the guts to do it. I say that as a veteran solo traveler and travel addict! The decision to move to Denmark for my Masters was an incredibly difficult one. Despite being challenging it has already been so informative, so enlightening, and so beneficial to my personal development – a mere 3 weeks in – that I can't even put into words what an enormous mistake I would have made had I decided to play it safe.

My relationship with travel has shown that travel is full of these types of opportunities and decisions. Yours may be much simpler than moving abroad for two years, or it may be much grander - say, a multi-year round-the-world trip. Ultimately, the more of these personal victories we push ourselves to embrace, the more we will learn about the world and ourselves. We will be better prepared to share that information with our friends, family, peers, and students. Travel is about seeing amazing places, having our palates delighted in new and exciting ways, while enjoying the richness of foreign hospitality and vibrant music. It is also about much more than that – it's about embracing the challenges the road puts us face-to-face with.

WE: Thanks so very much, Alex - we highly recommend your site to our Wandering Educators.

For more information, please see:

<http://virtualwayfarer.com>

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