



SUNRISE, SUNSET

November 2019

1988

I couldn't make out the time. Stacey Miller's outrageously big hair was blocking my view to the clock hung on the classroom wall. She shifted in her seat, but all I could catch was the upper sweep of the red second hand as it passed the twelve. I fidgeted impatiently, and promptly regretted it as I felt the left cuff

of my tight-rolled jeans come undone. I'd have to wait until recess for my expert older brother to re-roll it for me.

"Word number three is 'hours,' as in time," Mrs. Brockschmidt intoned as she circled the classroom, her frock covered in a smattering of faded chalk handprints. "For example, how many hours is it until lunchtime?"

I scratched the spelling words carefully onto the test paper, the sweet, woody smell of the pencil sharpening my concentration. My attention was short-lived, though, when the all-school paging system squawked: "Attention all teachers. Please prepare your classes for dismissal to the gymnasium for today's assembly." Stacey Miller leant over to put away her notebook, and I finally read the time with excitement. It was Randy Nadler time.

Randy Nadler was nothing short of my childhood idol. An unknown local, he freelanced by giving geography-themed school assemblies to fund his summer travels around the globe. He arrived once a year, toting his carousel of photographic slides to present images of far-off lands to the student body who sat mesmerised on individual carpet squares in the darkened gymnasium. His presentations followed a predictable format: an image of a map, money with strange designs, a colourful flag fluttering against a blue sky. As the clicker advanced each slide in the carousel with a sharp *ka-chunk*, images of Egypt's Pyramids, China's Great Wall, or wherever else he had chosen to visit that year would be projected on the pull-down screen like sunlight streaming through stained glass. By the time the last slide clicked through — always of a golden sunset — I felt I'd been magicked away on some spiritual plane to distant lands.

The slide carousel advanced one final click. "Normally, I end my show with a photograph of a sunset, but this year I've chosen a different image." Randy gave a sly smile. "Can anyone guess what this structure is?"

The image was abstract, like one of those quiz games where you must identify the larger object by some detailed close-up photo. Only this was played in reverse: an image of something monumental, illuminated on one side by sunset fire, plunged into ultramarine shadow on the other. The angle was odd — was the camera pointing up or down to capture this shot? Apart from shadow and sun against a curved line of pink stone, there was no other defining detail.

A few brave but tentative hands snuck up in the darkness of the gymnasium. "Is it a skyscraper?" came one response. "A Pyramid?" came another.

I had no idea, but it didn't matter. From that moment on, I knew I would always be seeking to expand my horizons. In between annual visits, I hoarded copies of National Geographic magazine, hand-drew the flags of every country I could name, and played countless games of *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* on the school's computers. I breathed in every squiggly line of every map I saw, constantly wondering about the people who lived in the shadow of a certain mountain range, the culture which thrived on a remote stub of land I might trace with my forefinger, or the boats that plied the waters of some distant shoreline. In the absence of a sunset photograph, a new dawn rose on my curiosity for exploring the world.

* * *

2015

Sunset at 35,000 feet almost never failed to be magical, even after two years of watching it nearly everyday as a flight attendant. With the curvature of the earth arcing gently below, starry skies illuminated one side of the aircraft while wispy clouds were set ablaze in hues of pink and orange on the other. While most passengers marvelled at the colourful sky, my gaze was nearly always fixed on the passing landscape. Here, high mountain peaks spilt like a sharp game of jacks across the continent below. It was remote and rugged, the snow-capped summits glinting with the last rays of the setting sun while valleys darkened into shadows. I could make out a winding mountain road traced by the headlights of a solitary car. In the dusk of the valleys, villages emerged, twinkling like fireflies.

The magic was just a veneer, however, to the unpolished reality of daily routine. Before leaving for the airport earlier that day, I had wheeled my bag out the door and called over my shoulder to my housemates: "I'm just stepping out to get some Chinese food... *in Singapore*. See you!" Despite the jollity of my comment and the lightness in my step, the truth was I was essentially heading to a soulless missile in the sky, and the heaviest bags I carried were the ones under my eyes from a consistent lack of good sleep.

The galley in business class that night was thankfully quiet, so I had pulled down the jump seat to thumb disinterestedly through a trashy tabloid a colleague had jammed behind the headrest before she had



Admit it: if you've been on a plane, you've taken a wing shot like this.



The bold and brash Singapore skyline makes for dramatic Instagram posts... but flight attendant life can be lonely.



A proud new recruit from 2015.

disappeared for break. The paper contained the same old celebrity nonsense and re-hashed sex tips that grace every supermarket checkout. I had tossed it aside and propped an elbow on the bustle that held the emergency escape slide, where I now sat in contemplative silence, gazing out the oval window at the setting sun and the passing mountains below.

The problem with being a flight attendant was that I was everywhere and nowhere at once. While breakfast in London, lunch in Vienna, and dinner in Rome looked great on Instagram, the reality was that I had no connection to these destinations at all. They blurred into a montage of airport security, hotel bars and overpriced cocktails. I didn't know anyone at that rooftop bar in Singapore or that beach cabana in Rio. Those smiling faces in that selfie from the boat ride in Miami were acquaintances met only an hour before. By the time I boarded the return flight to London, I'd have already forgotten your name in spite of the 3-hour tour of that giraffe sanctuary in Nairobi. It was a transient life of passing acquaintances, friendships of convenience, and casual encounters. In the words of my good friend Suzanne, "It's the perfect job for the shallow extrovert." If *home* is where you are known, then flight attendants are often *home-less*.

Staring down at those firefly villages, my heart dropped with a sudden

introspective turbulence. *Down there, I thought, life is happening. Birthdays, weddings and funerals. My nephew might be scoring a goal in his football match. A good friend was celebrating his completed master's thesis. An acquaintance was getting engaged; another, filing for divorce. My housemates were probably enjoying a comedy film, laughing together in the comfort of each other's company.* It was all happening down there in those valleys. Maybe not those particular valleys — but certainly somewhere on *terra firma*. I had joined the airlines to see the world, but all I really saw was life passing me by at 500 miles an hour.

Pointlessly, I checked my watch. Irrelevant, considering I was crossing a handful of time zones. I glanced at an in-flight entertainment screen and saw the yellow line trailing our pixelated plane on the world map, indicating our warp-speed displacement between x-ray scanners 10,000 miles apart. The bell curve of night cut a line through our location on the map, and I peered out the window again with fresh curiosity. The mountains I was flying over belonged to Iraq.

At the time, it wasn't even a whisper of an idea to move to the Middle East. All I knew was I needed to ground myself someplace before I drifted into the stratosphere, detached and forgotten by everyone like a lost helium balloon.

* * *



Beautiful autumn colours of Hawreman.

2018

The valley was still cradled in dawn, the mountain peaks obscuring the yellow disc of the sun until late morning gently poured over the ridge. The autumn air was cool, and gravel crunched underfoot as we climbed the heart of the valley. Our laughter echoed overhead as our hearts connected in friendly conversation. As the morning sun climbed even higher, the wispy clouds of night and contrails of passing jets burned away to reveal a flawlessly blue sky punctured by snow-capped peaks like cut crystal glass: a perfect day to go hiking in Hawreman with friends.

The Hawreman region lay nestled in the high mountain borderlands between Iraq and Iran. Unlike the somewhat arbitrary straight lines demarcating Iraq's borders with its other neighbours, the frontier with Iran looks like a hand splayed out into soft clay, each finger creating a squiggly valley along the spine of the Zagros mountains. Roads dead-end at the fingertips in a clutch of villages stacked up to the mountain ridges, ringed by pomegranate groves and almond orchards. Life here passes at its own pace, isolated from the outside world by impassable peaks and precipitous valleys.

Driving through one of the villages earlier that morning, we watched barefoot children kick a half-deflated football in the roadway, scattering as we approached and chasing after us as we passed. Women sat cross-legged in the courtyards of their homes, their faded floral house dresses collecting dust along the hems as they rolled out dough for their daily bread to be cooked in clay ovens. The village men — in their bloomer-style baggy trousers, starched lapel vests and tightly-wound cummerbunds — sipped tea and discussed daily affairs while seated by wooden crates stacked up to serve as tables.

We attracted a fair amount of attention as foreigners in these parts — not least of all from the border patrol. When a Kurdish *peshmerga* soldier appeared beside us, nobody even flinched despite the menacing firearm slung across his shoulder: we were accustomed by now to these routine interactions with local security forces. We smiled a chorus of social niceties — “*Slaw, kaka gyan! Bayaneet bash!*” Hello, dear sir! Good morning! “We’ve come down from Slemani today to discover your beautiful villages,” one of the more gifted linguists among us explained.



Hawreman villages are considered the keepers of Kurdish culture due to their relative isolation in the mountains.

The guard brightened at hearing a foreigner speak his language. “Welcome!” he chirped in the local dialect. “Where are you all from?”

Introductions were made: America, England, Canada, Germany, Poland. His tone went serious for a moment as he gestured towards a large boulder nestled in the crook of the valley ahead of us: “See that rock? Don’t go past it. It’s Iran on the other side.”

I stared at the open space that lay ahead. It struck me as odd that there was no greater line of defence between these two nations than a single boulder haphazardly flung by the forces of geology into the base of a mountain meadow. No border wall. No cyclone fencing. Just the summer wildflowers dying back in the late autumn chill.

Our new soldier friend was more than obliging to escort us to said border boulder and take a group photo of us perched atop it. A few of us even dared to poke a toe into Iranian soil.

“The Iranian guards are nice enough,” he explained. “We wave to each other and smile when we change over the duty,” — here he pointed up to the watchtowers perched on opposite sides of the ridge — “but this valley is really off limits for visitors.”

Someone in the group asked, “Can we visit the guard post?” and before we knew it, we were on the steep incline track switchbacking up the bowl to the ridge high above us.

A breathless 20 minutes later, we emerged from the shelter of the valley to be greeted by a bracing winter wind whipping across the peaks. Fifty meters ahead, a squat concrete barracks kept watch across the border, the tatters of a Kurdish flag violently fluttering at full display, the guy-rope clattering noisily against the metal flagpost. A giant barrel of a spotlight — cold and dark in the bright wintry sun — stood pointed downwards towards the boulder where we’d taken our group selfie earlier. Three more *peshmerga* guards in military fatigues emerged from the barracks and motioned for us to enter. Our party hurried in from the wind, passing the guards’ semi-automatic weapons propped casually against the external wall. Removing our shoes as per local custom, we ducked into the warmth of the sleeping quarters. A kerosene heater blazed warmth from the centre of the room, and several bunk beds hugged the perimeter. A framed and sunlight-faded portrait of the former president of Kurdistan hung on one wall. I casually settled on the edge of one of the bottom bunks, the scratchy wool blanket rough against my hands.

One of the guards came in with a tray of glasses brimming with sweet, amber-coloured tea. "*Bekhair bayn,*" he welcomed us, as he circled the room. We each politely took a glass and saucer, savouring its warmth between our chilled hands as our militarised hosts shared stories with us of their daily lives. The guard seated beside me pulled out his phone and opened his photos. "See? This one was found near the river. And this one we found after the snow melted." Images of corpses — crudely mangled by the elements in their unsuccessful refugee flight across the border — slid across his screen, raw and surreal. I took a gulp of tea quickly, scorching my throat in the process. It all seemed so casual, so nonchalant — drinking tea with border guards in their sentry outpost atop a mountain ridge overlooking Iran, while scrolling through photos of the victims of asylum seekers under the watchful gaze of a former president's image hung above a row of casually neglected semi-automatic weapons.

By the time our tea was finished and the photos exhausted, the morning sun from our hike had long passed the noonday zenith. We said our cheerful *thank yous* and *goodbyes*, shaking hands with these men who so dutifully protected the borders of our host country. We slipped on our shoes and ducked outside to a fading afternoon sky. A single jet contrail traced a vanishing line towards the sunset. Perhaps a crew

member sat on a jumpseat, staring down in wonder at the lives of the people living in these valleys, longing to be connected to a community, longing to live in the moment. I couldn't help but smile as I looked up, thanking God I was grounded.

* * *



Flirting with the Iranian border.

2018

Sunrise at the Taj Mahal is every bit as breathtaking as the photographs imply. It was Christmas morning, and I had made contrails to India for the winter break. As the mists shrouding the marble mausoleum lifted with the sunrise, my travel partner and I posed for the obligatory photos to prove — to ourselves more than anyone else — that our visit had been amazing. Afterwards, I traced the route on my phone's digital map as we rode across India's northern farmlands. Images of women in colourful saris hoisting baskets of produce on their

heads were framed by the car windows as we slid past. By the time we rolled into Jaipur, a city famous for its pink-coloured architecture, every building was glowing with sunset warmth.

Our driver Binnie suggested an impromptu stop before checking into the hotel. "It's not on the regular tour," he intoned with stereotypical Hindi sing-song, "but we have some extra time, and I think you will enjoy it." He pulled into a parking bay, and motioned towards the kiosk issuing admission tickets. The sign above the entrance read *Jantar Mantar*.

"Oh, this is the astronomical observatory built by the former maharajah," I noted. "I read about this in the guidebook."

Binnie nodded. "It has many interesting features; you will see." I easily parted with a small stack of colourful rupees for the admission fee and proceeded through the turnstile. The evening sun raked across the park-like grounds of the observatory, the pink stonework of the palace alternately ablaze with fire and plunged into navy-blue shadows. The open-air observatory contained a littering of ancient, large-scale instrumentation used to track movements of the sun, moon and stars: pendulums, oversized sextants, sculptures in alignment with the zodiac. However, time stopped and instantly rewound 30 years when my eyes fell on the one imposing landmark towering in the centre of the courtyard.

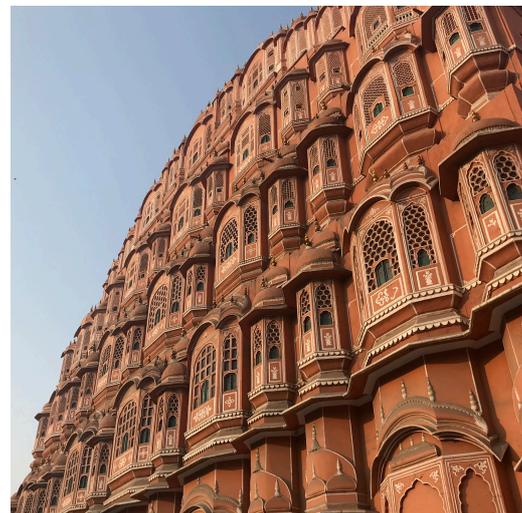
"Can anyone guess what this structure is?" Randy asked.

An illuminated image of pink stone and blue shadow. A gymnasium plunged in darkness. The humming fan of the slide projector. The matted pile of the carpet square beneath me.

"This is a sundial," Randy informed. "A sundial is used to tell time based on the shadow it casts from the changing position of the sun. This is the largest one in the world, and it is found in the Jantar Mantar observatory in Jaipur, India, where I ended my travels this summer."

I reeled at the g-force of having been thrown back in mental time; the memory vividly replayed despite years of being buried under the accumulated drift of my life lived across cultures and continents. It came hurtling back through the synapses of my mind with all the force of a plane lifting off; and I stood — mouth agape — at being suddenly confronted with a long-forgotten source of inspiration. I wasn't even aware of the tears in my eyes until I returned to the car. "What's wrong?" Binnie asked.

"Just the air pollution," I lied. "It gives me red eyes."



Jaipur is known for its pink-coloured architecture.

When I returned to the hotel that evening, I flipped open my laptop and tapped a search string into my web browser. First hit, and I found what I was looking for. I copied and pasted the address into a blank e-mail, and began composing the body of the message:

“Dear Mr. Nadler,

Thirty years ago you came to my elementary school to give a presentation about your travels in India. Unusually that year, you decided to finish your slideshow not with a photo of a sunset, but with a photo of a giant sundial. Your presentations were always a highlight of my school year, and I remember them with great fondness — particularly this one.

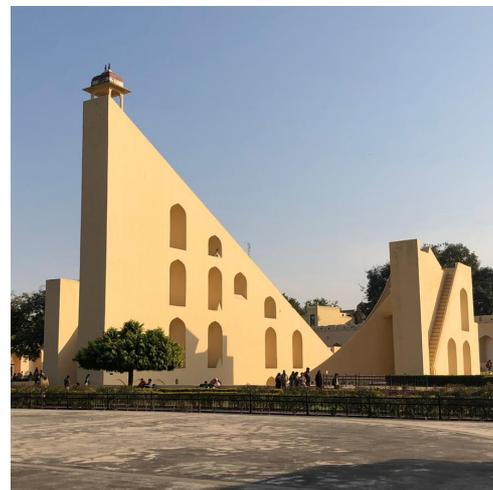
Your annual talks ignited a fire in me for learning about the world. Since my school days, I have lived in four countries across three continents, and visited scores more. I credit much of this life experience to the inspiration I received from you as a child: the inspiration to never stop exploring and to learn with an open mind about different cultures, people and places.

Today, I visited Jaipur, India for the first time, and saw that very same sundial from your journey here all those years ago. Call it karma, but it seems only fitting to express my gratitude for introducing me to new ways of seeing the world. My only regret is that it has taken me thirty years to say so.

I’ve attached a photo from my visit today — just how I remember your photo from long ago. Thank you for inspiring that young schoolboy to expand his horizons to people and places far beyond the setting sun. I hope you have continued to make this world a better, more connected place through your work. I know I have certainly tried to do the same.

With many thanks and warm regards,

Joel Bond



The sundial at Jantar Mantar in Jaipur, India, which inspired me to learn about the world as child.

GET IN TOUCH!



Joel Bond currently lives in Iraqi Kurdistan, working as an English teacher. His favourite places to spend time are the gym, the kitchen and foreign countries.



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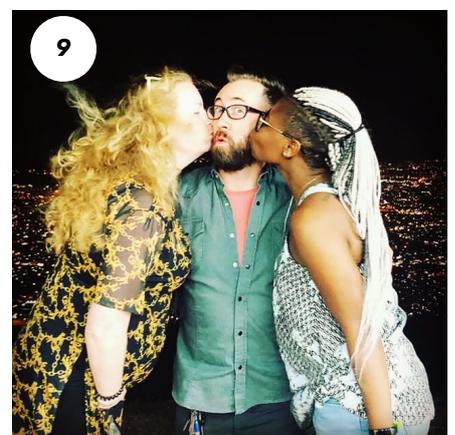
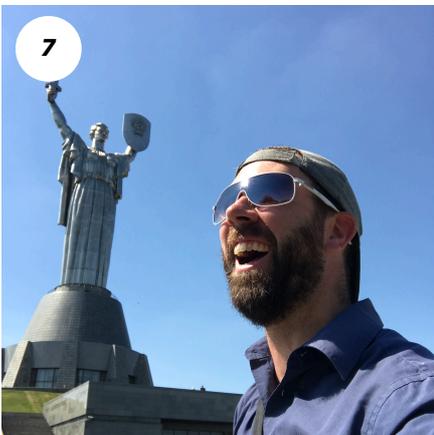
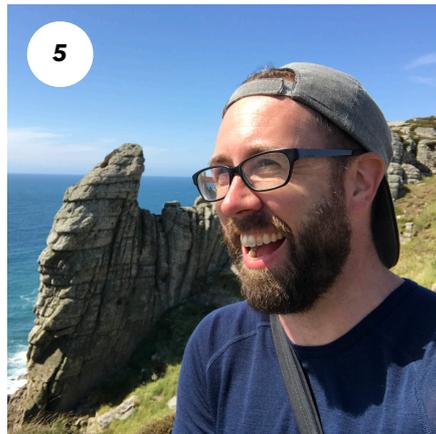
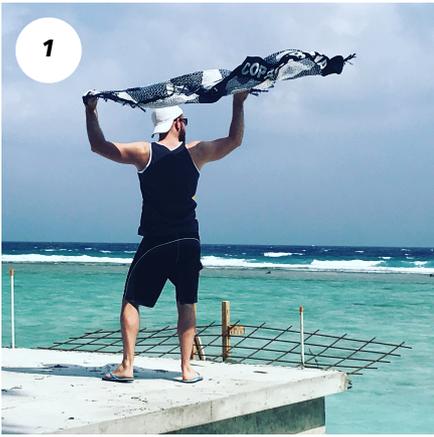
via LinkTree



Joel Bond



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TRAVEL HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2019

1. New Year's in the Maldives
2. Nawroz Holiday with Mom and Papa C
3. The Cedars of Lebanon
4. Surfing Cornwall in the UK
5. Remote and Wild Lundy Island
6. Scooting through the Baltics
7. The Motherland Statue in Kiev
8. Azerbaijan: The Land of Fire
9. Back to a new school year in Suli
10. Helping refugees in Kurdistan
11. #laughingtraveler in Erbil