

# THE JOY OF GETTING LOST, BY BELLA POLLEN

**M**y father was an inveterate traveller, often to the most far-off countries. When I was small, he would bring presents back in his suitcase. To begin with, dolls – knitted in Peru, or carved and painted in the Seychelles. Once, from Russia, a beautiful *devotchka* dressed in seal-skins who, on being turned upside down, revealed beneath her sombre skirt an alternative self, clad in jolly national costume. When I grew bored of dolls (I tended to melt the Barbies I was given), Dad suggested stamp collecting, and began sending me postcards from all over the world. He was in the auction business and stamps, he explained, lowering a magnifying glass on to a rare Australian bird, a Panamanian landscape or a crusading knight from English history, were miniature works of art, their inky postmarks portals to new and unexplored worlds. These, he promised, were teasers for what would one day become my favourite collections of all: places and people. Today, the stamps are long gone, but my curiosity about the faraway remains.

The trouble is, the technician in charge of my design short-changed me on geographical intelligence. My inability to generate cognitive maps is so profound it suggests some baby-dropped-on-head incident to which my parents never confessed. Unsurprisingly, I'm not everyone's top choice of companion on a road trip. In Yemen, I accidentally map-read my driver into a landmine area. I can spend days wandering around a city looking for my parked car. Once, stranded in the outback, facing death by circling buzzard, I had to wake my husband back in London and get him to steer me remotely to the nearest town.

Still, mild danger and moderate inconvenience aside, I've come to regard the ease with which I get lost as a plus. The word "adventure" has a broad etymology: it means to wander and travel, but also an account of marvellous things, a wonder, that which happens by chance. Technology has taken some of the chance out of exploring. Getting smoothly from A to B is good organisation, but doesn't necessarily make for great travel. Adventure slips through the cracks of disorganisation or the fault lines of an itinerary. Once you stop being frightened of the lack of control it implies, "lost" becomes the treasure map. It makes for connections with strangers.

**Once you stop being frightened, lost becomes the map**

It leads you to those marvellous things, and on into the unknown.

One way or another, this four-letter word has been the theme of my life. Lost in my head, lost in a book, lost in awe at some mountain or other. I've stopped beating myself up for my shaky grasp on the earth's compass points. I like the randomness of odd encounters. The deeper I go into somebody else's world, the further I leave my own behind; and as the familiar vanishes, as the air settles and time slows down, I wait happily for that surrealist's road of unexpected twists to open up ahead. *"Meet Me in the In-Between"*, by Bella Pollen, is published by Mantle at £18.99 >



Daria Werbowy in Peru. Vogue March 2008. Below: Bella's father, Peregrine, in Chile in the late Sixties; family postcards and letters from around the world

