

My Life is an Open Book

Written by Jill Kerr Tepe

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Love of new places was ingrained into me at an early age by our annual family vacations,

but I would have to say that books taught me to transport myself into another time and place. There is nothing so satisfying as reading an enthralling story and then seeking out that setting, where you can imagine those characters, real or fictitious, living their everyday lives. It is this practice that truly makes travel come alive in my mind. When I visit a place in person that I know so well in my head, it's like visiting an old friend; I don't feel like a stranger in a place I've never been, regardless of the fact that it is indeed my first time to walk those streets. I suppose it's this whimsical and fantastical approach to life that always made my sisters roll their eyes at me, but it is my own way of introducing myself to a new city.

While reading about a place is certainly one form of bonding for me, it is a singular and self-contained aspect, and entirely inadequate on its own. Sharing, above all, creates the perfect adventure. Sharing experiences with my family and friends is my highest goal and greatest source of joy in my life.

I have wonderful memories of driving to Florida, sitting in the back seat of a Buick on the hump seat in the middle of my 2 sisters: my lap piled high with a small television, a basketball, and Julie's legs. Ahh, the joys of being the youngest sister. Although unglamorous and certainly uncomfortable, those road trips with family always seemed to spawn the funniest tales, where even the bad parts of the trip became something to smile about afterward.

We have been fortunate enough to have parents that cared to take us on trips, as well as an Aunt Lu who took us on a whirlwind European tour in which we visited 11 countries in 3 weeks. Definitely crazy, but an amazing way to whet one's appetite for all types of European culture.

It's also been an exciting experience for me to find my own love of travel plant itself in my husband. It's infectious and insatiable, and once you've experienced it, you constantly want more. It's amazing to be able to take a romantic trip with your husband who is also your best friend, and then to meet up with your other best friend, who happens to be your sister. And having a few cousins thrown in there makes it even better.

I used to only seek out warm-weather vacations, but that way of travel changed drastically in 2008 when I was diagnosed with melanoma at the age of 25. My whole world hung in the balance as I waited for the full prognosis and wondered if I could ever be outside again, much less alive. Thank God it was discovered early at stage 1 and was treatable with surgery, but it did completely alter my lifestyle. I have found my own way to be outside and live a normal life, all the while hiding from the sun I once worshiped. It has been mostly a blessing, a casting-off of the chains of having to lay out and roll over and try to be tan all the time, and also because it caused me to evaluate my life and appreciate the precious time and cherished people in it. It also opened my eyes to the pleasures of vacations other than beach-lazing, and to the possibilities of sun-coverage in the form of wide-brimmed hats, cabanas, and umbrellas. And

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don't worry, I will certainly be providing you with a full breakdown of the best sunless tanners, sun screens, hats, and ways of staying safe while still looking good and enjoying yourself.

Like I said before, the best part about travel is the sharing, so I am looking forward to sharing my experiences here, and all the while, loving every moment I spend traveling with my family and friends.

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