

Flightless

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SURRENDERING my last drink ticket across the bar, I eyed two handlers introducing a hawk and a baby sea otter to conference attendees. The bird's eyes were closed, and the otter was a limp rope in its keeper's hands. As I turned to locate a buffet of small plates, the evening's entertainment was announced. SeaWorld's Antarctica exhibit had just opened, and, as the world's travel leaders, we were privileged to a backstage pass. We were going to see penguins.

Billboards advertising *Antarctica: Empire of the Penguin* had dotted the highway between the Orlando airport and my hotel. I'd just taken a job with a company that partnered with tour operators to provide destination-based reading lists to travelers. A bookseller by trade, but new to the tourism industry, I'd agreed to meet my manager and the CEO at this conference, though Florida and its Magic Kingdom seemed a strange place to convene experts in creating, as one brochure put it, "authentic travel experiences" involving some of the world's most exotic locales.

By the time I'd arrived, the conference was in full swing. I wandered among panels, learning "The Seven Secrets to Promoting Your Destinations," how to "Create Tangible Institutional Benefits through Intangible Customer Connections," and, ultimately, how to "Turn Travelers into Donors." Between plenaries, attendees networked in the "International Bazaar," a ballroom lined with bannered booths advertising trips to Bhutan, Cuba, Iceland, India. I was no longer in Orlando, or in any recognizable destination. I was in between, maybe, or behind the scenes. I was in the business of travel.

Before each session, a short promotional film flashed across a screen behind the speaker's podium—a chance for the tourism board sponsoring the panel to showcase its destination. While the country changed each time, the presentation became predictable. A woman ate from small plates, then sipped a glass of wine before

laughing, openmouthed, at an unheard joke. As music crescendoed, she performed yoga in silhouette against a sun rising above a mountain crest, waterfall, or pristine beach. Finally, she met a handsome local man (unless she was traveling with her camera-toting husband and well-behaved children).

I got goosebumps every time—the films were well produced. But they also made me uncomfortable. The activities didn't resemble any travel experience I'd ever had.

I'd traveled to many foreign countries, endured culture shock in various forms, but by late afternoon, as I sat next to my manager at a "Social Media Therapy Bar," I still couldn't say where I was. Adjusting my name tag, I sat up and began taking down bullet points from the presentation, but stopped when I read the second "Key to a Successful Facebook Page" I'd just copied into my notebook.

"Have an Interesting Real Life," it instructed.

When the Bazaar shut down at the end of the day, we were shuttled across a few empty parking lots to SeaWorld for dinner. In a banquet hall filled with round tables, each of us found a beaded souvenir pouch at our place, hand sewn in a country I'd never visited. Memento from a trip not yet taken.

Before the small plates were served, we were treated to another film, this time about Colombia. I watched with growing fascination as, after the traveler performed each of her prescribed activities, a mysterious pendant that hung from her neck flashed gold.

When the woman returned home, she opened the pendant, which turned out to be a kind of locket. Out sprung images from her travels—the small plates, the sunsets, the open-mouthed laugh, followed by a tagline: "Colombia *Is* Magical Realism."

I jotted this phrase into my notebook, next to "Have an Interesting Real Life," where it appeared to make more sense.

When it was time to see the penguins, we shuffled out of the banquet hall, past the otter, the hawk, and their handlers, to be greeted by "people movers"—SeaWorld employees waving flashlights with orange cones attached to shepherd us through the dim labyrinth of their theme park after hours.

I'd never been in an amusement park past closing, and it was strangely melancholic. Roller coasters loomed on the darkening horizon, silent and still. Dolphins circled and recircled a tank before empty stands. Strains from a marimba-band recording echoed eerily from an abandoned food stall. Conversation between conference participants grew hushed with anticipation and perhaps a few nostalgic thoughts, though we weren't sure for what.

After a five-minute march, we arrived at the South Pole. Cameras flashed against ghostly plaster icebergs towering into the night sky. Cartoonish signs welcomed us to Antarctica—in case we'd mistaken it for its antipode. The set vaguely resembled Santa's workshop, and I wouldn't have been surprised to see a reindeer clip past.

I joined a queue behind my boss and the CEO, both in suit coats and toting briefcases. Wearing only a thin dress and cardigan, I shivered as I listened to conversation around me; a few of the more stalwart attendees had resumed conducting business. I reached out to touch a faux iceberg and was startled to find it convincingly cold.

Magical realism? I wondered.

As the line shifted forward, twenty of us were corralled in a plaster cavern. A screen flashed on, displaying a flock of CGI penguins. A cheery deep voice—sounding a lot like the narrator from the tourism videos—began to unfold a plot with a fuzzy narrative line about a baby penguin named Puck. A snowstorm moved in on screen, and Puck's parents began to waddle off into a sunset-pink aurora australis.

"Follow Puck!" the narrator urged.

We were then presented with a choice: the Mild Expedition or the Wild Expedition? My colleagues and I opted for Wild.

We were enclosed with eight other reckless souls in a smaller artificial ice cave. Someone was breathing shallowly over my shoulder, and when I glanced at him he confessed to being claustrophobic. Music you could meditate to echoed through our grotto, perhaps to soothe the panic growing tangible in the cool air. Puck blinked and gestured from a screen embedded in the wall until the doors opened to reveal our chariot, a souped-up version of your traditional teacup ride.

I squeezed in between my boss and the CEO, who self-consciously perched briefcases on their knees. The cars swooped across a floor of ersatz ice, while screens flashed images of Puck dashing ahead of vicious sea creatures. Steam shot from crevices as we spun around low-hanging plastic stalactites. Just as my last small plate began to rise, it was over.

Our car pulled up to a ledge and we were helped out by the people movers. The air had become noticeably arctic, and there were grumbles about how we might as well have stayed back home in Boston or Minneapolis or Nova Scotia.

Then we smelled it—a musty odor, like wet floor mats shut up in a subcompact. The penguins.

The ride had deposited us just outside a reconstructed habitat. Beyond a protective wall of glass, a smattering of species stood erect in their everyday tuxes on an icy bank. Something in the dignified poses of those flightless birds felt familiar. Clustered in small groups, the penguins bobbed and shuffled as if at their own International Bazaar.

Our tour ended at the gift shop. My last drink ticket spent, I was studying a row of plush penguins when a young man with flushed cheeks and purposefully disheveled hair approached. “Brad” was still wearing his name tag, but his suit coat was flung over one arm, his collar undone as if he were immune to the icy air. I recognized in his gaze the glint a leopard seal had shot the audience before chasing Puck.

Avoiding Brad’s leer, I headed for the atrium, where a three-person band was covering the Beatles. A crowd had gathered around a tank that extended below the viewing area we’d just left. I descended a set of stairs to join them.

The tank was empty of sea life. I peered up through the surface and could see a few birds perched on the icy shelf. One deigned to dive, arcing over our heads with unexpected grace.

Now I was remembering my own travels, moments of connection and transcendence I’d experienced far from home. As if some locket had opened on my life, I saw myself summiting a mountain in

Denali National Park, surviving a long train ride into Russian tundra, then sharing a cup of tea with a stranger.

The magic of travel could not be conjured, summoned, curated, or bought. What made these moments shimmer in memory were the hardships I'd endured to reach them—whether solitude or seasickness, exhaustion, even danger. Authentic travel depends on a willingness to leave behind the comfort of routine to encounter other ways of being, to feel, at least for a little while, displaced. Only then can we touch something real.

The destinations showcased at the conference had been commodified into products that varied little from one geographical point to the next. What made each place unique had been obliterated by a preplanned itinerary, undermining the joy of discovery. To embark on these tours was not to leave home at all. At most, they offered the cheap thrills of a theme park: a spin on a teacup, a trip through a small world.

I stared into waters the exact turquoise of the carpet of the ballroom where we'd dined that evening. As the bird dove once more, I thought I caught its eye—a flash of intelligence that seemed to register, observe, and hover above the rest of us.

Cocking its head slightly, the penguin glided past.