



## LIVE THE DREAM

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When one of my girlfriends emailed an hour after our arranged Skype date to say she was sorry she'd forgotten to Skype in, but "thought you'd probably be busy looking at pretty old buildings or eating a pastry anyway," I lost the plot altogether.

"What does she think I'm doing?" I wailed into my laptop screen at my mum, the unfortunately next caller. "Having a good time?!"

Of course I was supposed to be having a good time, all the time, because I was on my Big OE – the young New Zealander's overseas experience, sold as a rite of passage.

I was following in the footsteps of my gran, who moved to Scotland and made some new friends but missed kumara; my dad, who moved to the USA and found a career; and my cousin, who moved to London, met a man in a pub who had once visited her hometown, Upper Hutt, and married him.

I had launched myself headfirst down the Brain Drain, expecting fun times 24/7. Except three months in, I wasn't feeling it at all.

I had moved to my boyfriend's homeland, Denmark, settling in Copenhagen for a kind of romantically sponsored overseas adventure.

So actually yeah, I did find myself living in a charming, 100-year-old brick townhouse with pink hollyhocks lining the front fence, and I was stuffing myself full of creamy pastries, but only because I was miserable, not to mention unemployed, desperate for some consolation delivered by a familiar but pixelated face.

Unlike the Contiki kids I knew, I craved more than a Facebook album of my sunburned self cuddling up to a bunch of Aussie dudes in matching T-shirts, drinking in a hostel where we'd woken up too late to see any of Europe's sites. I was envisioning a life, not a holiday.

My new life would include a new language, a bevy of trendy Scandinavians as friends and hopefully a job I could stick at. But none of that had happened yet, and I'd almost run out of cash.

My first birthday abroad yielded 20 emails all asking some version of. "How's it going LIVING THE DREAM?!" when all I'd been doing was folding the laundry, a chore I had wrongly assumed would disappear from my life as soon as I hopped on a plane.

Friends back home tuned out when I tried to describe what it's like looking for a job when you can't read the clas-

sified, eating smelly pickled fish to fit in with your new friends, and that disorienting sense of loneliness that never quite seems to subside. Unwilling to be exposed to the idea that this version of real life might await them if they ever embarked on their own OE, they quickly changed the subject back to all that fun I must be having. Clearly they didn't want to hear about it.

That would take another three years, when finally an old school friend emailed to ask whether I had any tips for finding a job in another language. Luckily it didn't take me quite so long to stop feeling sorry for myself.

It's high time Kiwis abandoned the idea of the Big OE as an inescapable, booze-filled, singularly fun time. Much like the quarter-acre pavlova paradise, it's not all it's cracked up to be, and viewing it that way doesn't leave any room for an individual experience.

Growing up on those isolated isles, we're encouraged to venture out and see what the world has to offer us. It's a beautiful idea. But if we come home full of lively stories, we're arrogant prats, and if we admit we're having a hard time away from home, we're somehow letting down the team.

Many Kiwis talk about the Big OE as if it is inevitable. But let's remember, it requires a certain amount of privilege to afford one in the first place and a serious amount of ambition – or parental handouts – to keep yourself going once you get there. Not everyone has that opportunity. And it's ok to have a different dream altogether.

The Big OE is no more than a parental conspiracy. Surely you've heard the saying. "If you love something, set it free, and then cross your fingers it comes home when its visa is up and settles down the road from you, not rabbiting on about 'that time in London' for the rest of its days."

My own overseas adventure hasn't been all unemployment and smelly cuisine. Just like all those people still trying to sell you the dream, I, too, have welcomed the incredible, hilarious, life-giving moments, enough of them that four years since I left New Zealand I still live in Europe, and I'm unlikely to move home any time soon.

In the end, an OE is just a life lived elsewhere for some amount of time. Wherever you end up living, you still have to do your laundry. ■

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