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LIFESTYLE TRAVEL

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Journal for a journey

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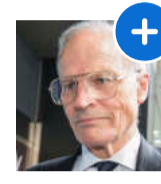
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Bernard Appassamy's childhood chore is now a treasured possession.

No amount of whining or sniffing would make my father flinch. "One day, you will thank me for this," he insisted. Under duress, I kept on writing daily.

In 1969, as a 10-year-old growing up in French-speaking Mauritius, I took for granted that I could watch the sun rise and set over the ocean. Anything beyond the horizon was a concept vastly unimaginable. My parents had taken my two sisters to Europe five years earlier but it seemed my turn would never come.



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So when my father broke the news of a two-month overseas trip that included my mother and me, I erupted with joy. Once I had come down from the ceiling fan, he dropped the inevitable "but".

"But you will have to keep a travel journal ..." he stressed. My sisters had been subjected to the same ritual.

The exercise entailed taking daily notes of our travels and activities in draft form. I would then submit weekly my prose to my father for discussion, correction and approval until I would later transcribe the text in my best script in a red notebook bought in Paris. The final layout would also accommodate photos, postcards and various memorabilia.

How precious my red notebook has since become. These pages that I resented filling evoke so much more than my sensational adventure. The agonising wait before our departure. The lying in bed at night, eyes tightly closed, picturing the magic split second when I would finally walk into a plane, when it would take off, when I would FLY. My minute instructions to my sisters about my Dalmatian, Kim, that I was leaving behind, and the bazaar of 50-odd relatives, friends and neighbours who drove us in cortege to the airport to send us off.

Before we left, my father took me to his tailor for my first long trousers in grey, prickly wool. I was also fitted with a casual black jacket and a burgundy waistcoat with gold buttons, to wear over long-sleeve white shirts that my mother organised. These were clothes that, given our tropical climate, I had previously never needed. With black patent-leather shoes, a blue vinyl Air France cabin bag and a sharp haircut, I was seriously ready.

Now, I laugh loudly when I read my candid, exuberant observations. My favourite entry is for Las Palmas, Canary Islands, where our cruiser anchored overnight and I noticed a Dalmatian with bigger spots than Kim. There were also some disturbing moments that I remember vividly but did not have words for - like my shock at seeing signs enforcing racial segregation in South Africa.

I did not ask for my journal back from my father in Mauritius until my visit five years ago, when he was dying. It meant so much to him that I had been happy for him to be its guardian. Again, I prodded my parents for more details; again, we laughed. My father also presented me with another much older journal with a marbled cover, leather spine and gold embossed lettering. His own from a trip to Madagascar in 1948, at age 22.

Merci Papa.

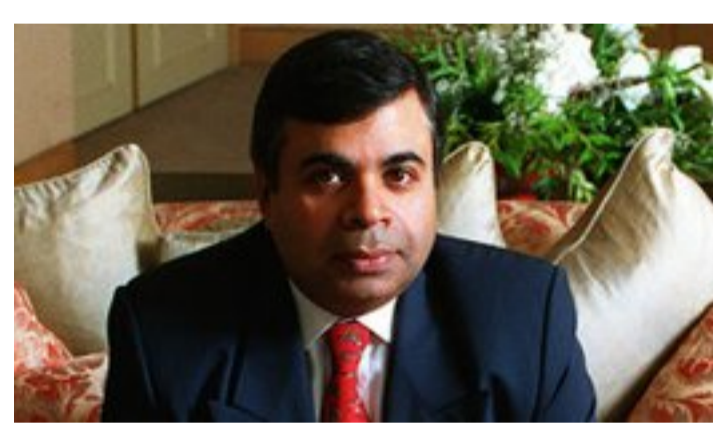
Each week onthero@d will feature a reader's email from their travels. Submissions should include the sender's permanent address and phone number. Email to travel@smh.com.au. The email judged the best each month will win a Six Million Dollar Home Camera bag valued at \$150 from Crumpler Design in Paddington, Newtown and Bondi (www.crumpler.com.au).

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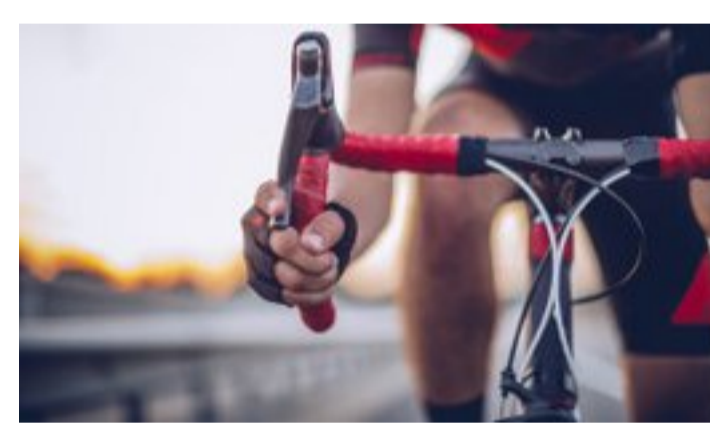
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