



**MAKING  
GOOD  
ON DOING  
GOOD**

BY BJÖRN KARLMAN

## THE DECISION

It's funny what your college years can inspire. In the fall of 2012, six years after my graduation from Andrews, my wife Jammie and I decided to make the decision that would change everything: We were going to spend 2013 traveling the world and doing volunteer work.

Let me back up a bit. Four years at Andrews have a way of whetting your appetite for international adventure. While at Andrews I went on a class trip to Cuba, studied Spanish in South America for a semester and spent a year volunteering for an international boarding school in the UK. My friends and professors at Andrews were from all over the world. Being Swedish, I was a faithful presence at any and every Scandinavian get-together that I caught wind of. The funds on my semester-long meal plan always took a dramatic hit whenever the annual International Food Fair rolled around. My friends and I often picked churches based on which one had the best international potluck on a given week. Everything about my Andrews experience seemed to point me in the direction of international service. I knew that at some point in "the future" I wanted to both live and work internationally.

Luckily, the girl I married shared my enthusiasm for creating an international life. We agreed that a great way to kickstart this life would be a period of extended travel during which we would volunteer in different service capacities.

Whenever Jammie and I talked about our secret plans we grew more excited. We knew the trip would change our lives. We knew it was the right thing to do. But for the longest time we couldn't muster the courage to take the leap and go.

In the fall of 2012, Jammie and I decided that we could not wait any longer. We simply could not put off our plans any more. If we didn't take the step now, life would make it harder and harder to escape and we would just grow frustrated, bemoaning the lives we wished we'd pursued. We simply could not let that happen. We made a pact: "We are doing this and we are doing this now!"

Once the big decision was made, the rest came more easily: We picked the places we would live in 2013: Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Berlin and Bombay (Mumbai) and began researching places to live and causes to champion.

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Eating on the streets of Bangkok is a multisensory experience

We did all the scary stuff as fast as we could so we wouldn't back out. We told those closest to us of our plans. Job resignation letters were drafted, re-drafted, signed and delivered. We sold, gave away or dumped a ton of stuff that we had collected over the years. We bought round-the-world tickets. And we got on a plane. We were off!

## REALITY HITS

We were hungry and completely jet-lagged. The adrenaline rush of landing in exotic Thailand was starting to wear off and the abnormalities of our situation were starting to sink in. What were we doing here?

We shuffled out into the unbelievably humid Bangkok night, not quite able to believe our senses. Dodging traffic, we hunted down the first of the dozens of food stalls we would frequent over our stay in Thailand.

"Until you've eaten on a Bangkok street, your noodles mingling with your sweat, and your senses dulled by chili, exhaust and noise, you haven't actually eaten Thai food," said the *Lonely Planet* guidebook we had downloaded. I have always loved Thai food but the book was right, Thai food on the street was a totally different, multisensory experience.

The spice level of the food was predictable, but the flavors were so enticing you couldn't put your fork down. Jammie put it well: "My mouth is burning but I just can't stop eating!" It was so amazingly good.

"What other city has such a full-flavored, no-holds-barred, insatiable, fanatical approach to eating?" asks the guidebook. I had just landed but I was guessing the answer was "none."

At the local prices, the dishes tasted even better. Yes, we had done our research and yes, we knew that the prices were extremely low by American standards, but the feeling of eating a whole meal for 50 baht (\$1.60) was amazing. "We may end up doing a lot less cooking here than we expected..." I blogged.

## DISASTER

But then it happened (and I'll quote directly from my January 15th blog post titled "Pride cometh before the fall—ignore my last post:") "Some of you saw this coming: Swiftly on the heels of our most dramatic culinary adventure last week—eating raw durian (a fruit) and sticky rice—I was hit like a sledgehammer with the most violent food



**Top left:** Jammie in front of Bangkok Chinatown's Wat Traimit—The Temple of the Golden Buddha. **Bottom left:** The variety of delectable Thai food available in Bangkok was the source of both pleasure and pain. **Above:** During the three months they were in Bangkok, Björn and Jammie visited a group of 3-year-old children every Monday at the Thai Red Cross Children's Home.

poisoning I've had since college. I mean it was brutal, out-of-both-ends stuff requiring Tarzan-like leaps out of bed to the facilities.

"As much as my stomach was telling me never to eat Thai street food again, my brain knew better. This was a lesson in restraint and common sense (the gooey fruit had been festering in a lukewarm milky substance for hours without refrigeration and I really should have known better than to think I could handle it). It was not grounds for a drastic retreat to peanut butter sandwiches for the balance of my stay in Bangkok.

"My default MO is one of at least slight overconfidence. Often it pays off—I attempt challenges, assuming things will work out and then they often do. But occasionally you just end up loosening your bowels."

## THAI RED CROSS CHILDREN'S HOME

"So you guys are actually going to be around for a while, correct? We've had some journalists and tourists come through just for the experience and that isn't fair to the kids." The administrator was clearly vetting us over the phone. We assured her that we were in Bangkok for three months and understood the need for consistency with kids.

So began our visits to the Thai Red Cross Children's Home. Every Monday we would visit the same group of 3-year-olds. It felt a little like my weekly visits to my adopted family in Benton Harbor back in my college days. Just as I appreciated being able to build relationships with the children and families that I would work with in Benton Harbor on a weekly basis, getting to know the toddlers at the children's home was a lot of fun.

The children at the home had been abandoned by their families at a hospital in Bangkok. The goal was to either reunite them with their biological parents or to find them a new family. As far as this was concerned, we were powerless to help. What we did try to do was spend quality time with the kids. I learned a lot. I am now far more adept at distracting a toddler with colorful toys and getting him or her to give screaming a rest than I have ever been before. I am, however, no better at spoon-feeding than when I started. The kids I fed always seemed to end up with impressive food collections in their bibs.

## IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTER

If you are a foreigner and you overstay your visa for too long either intentionally or by mistake, you basically end up in jail. Or so the people we visited weekly at Bangkok's Immigration Detention Center (IDC) would say.

The idea behind this second Bangkok-based service project was two-fold. We wanted to help offer encouragement to those that were detained. Many lacked the resources to hire the right attorney and file the necessary paperwork and so were stuck indefinitely.

But we felt a special burden to help married couples that were detained. Detainees were kept in gender-specific quarters so married couples were separated upon entry to the IDC. There was a loophole though: If we requested to visit both the husband and the wife, they were permitted to be in each other's presence for the approximately 50 minutes of visitation time. This alone made the service experience worth the effort. It was essentially prison ministry with a twist.

# "HOME" IS WHEREVER WE CAN CREATE COMMUNITY AND BE OF SERVICE.



**Above:** Weekly visits to the Bangkok Immigration Detention Center helped facilitate meetings between married detainees. **Above center:** The rigors of travel required some relaxation time for Björn, reclining in front of a replica of the Sanphet Prasat Palace. **Above right:** A soup kitchen at the Basilica of San José de Flores in Buenos Aires. **Right:** The skyline of Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires, rises above pampas grass in the Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve.

## ADVENTURE

Adventure in this kind of a year abroad comes less in the form of extreme sports or sightseeing and more as an everyday occurrence. Whether dodging rats the size of full-grown cats scurrying out from under trash bags, watching Muay Thai (kickboxing) demonstrations in the streets or doing a Thai visa run into Communist Laos for two days (a story in itself), life is genuinely different.

When we lived in Northern California it felt as though you had to escape the day-to-day to experience adventure. This year, I was finding out, our average day *was* the adventure.

And then came Argentina...

## BUENOS AIRES!

After three months of non-stop spice consumption in Thailand, we landed in Argentina, which may as well be Italy if the most readily available food is any indication. As much as it is tempting to go off on a tangent detailing our every pizza, pasta and alfajor (amazingly delicious Argentine desserts consisting of sandwich-like cookies filled with dulce de leche, a creamy caramel confection made from milk and sugar), let me just say that self-restraint is a quality I have had to develop over my time here.

Our first two weeks in Buenos Aires we lived in Flores, the neighborhood that Pope Francis is from. For our weekly service project we chose the Soup Kitchen at the Basilica of San José de Flores. Neither of us had ever worked in a soup kitchen. We are still learning. I will confess to being more than a little overwhelmed by the speed of the operation. In about two hours, we work two periods that serve about 100 people each. It is fast-paced to say the least!

## MID-YEAR REFLECTIONS

We are just shy of being halfway through our year. It's too early to be able to predict how this year will turn out. The only thing I can say with any certainty is that this weather better be as cold as it will ever get this year (the summer months back home=winter in Buenos Aires).

I will say that I have learned a lot about the futility of amassing possessions. Acquiring more "stuff" is one of the most pointless things we do in life. As mentioned before, Jammie and I ended up donating a ridiculous amount of our possessions to our local thrift store when we left Northern California. It was mildly absurd. These were mostly things that had cost quite a lot to buy. And in the end it was all just stuff... stuff that was in the way of us and a better, freer life. This stuff didn't add value; if anything it was a hassle, a nuisance. The hours we spent giving or throwing it all away have taught me one thing as we walk past shop windows around the world: Keep walking.

I am extremely grateful for this experience. Many that travel talk about how much they took for granted at home; what they miss while abroad. Jammie and I are a lot more focused on how enriching this experience has been so far. We miss family and friends (and Mexican food) but we don't really miss home. In fact, one thing we are learning is that "home" truly is a fluid concept.

"Home" to us now is wherever we can create community and be of service. "Home" is not defined by conveniences, material things, an apartment or house. Home is a mindset. It is a decision to be present and to be grateful. ■

For more on Björn (BA '07) and Jammie's 2013 service and travel adventures, check out their blogs: [CultureMutt.com](http://CultureMutt.com) (Björn's issue-based blog covering cultural issues and service ideas from the road) and [GoKarlMans.com](http://GoKarlMans.com) (Jammie's blog covering the latest adventures, food and sights from their trip around the world).