

*»Heimweh & Fernweh«*

# THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

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Germans have a real knack for coining terms with an unsurpassable ring to them (see *schadenfreude*, *zeitgeist* et al.), and though they did not completely invent the Romantic movement (though they're pretty sure they did) they did in this great German tradition come up with some words to arm the language of Romanticism with befitting gravitas. *Weltschmerz* sort of springs to mind here. In that same vein, the words *Heimweh* (aching for home) and *Fernweh* (aching to be away) are able to transcend being more than just abstract states of mind. These are painful conditions!

The idea of 'heimweh' or 'nostalgia' (*nóstos* – returning home, *álgos* – pain or ache) really came into its own during Romanticism, an era characterised by a growing sense of nationalism (originally intended as pride in the land and people whence you came) and surrounded by war. *Heimweh* had the status of real illness; the playing of traditional horn melodies (*Kuhreihen*) were known to cause such severe outbreaks of nostalgia in Swiss mercenaries that the music was forbidden out of fear of desertion or death. These days it's hard to relate to such irrepressible yearnings for home, at least in the sense of a hometown or motherland. Encompassing two nationalities at birth is not so unusual, then all it takes is one or two moves with your family or loved one and by age 25 the simple question of where you're from requires a 20-minute explanation: "Well, my dad's this and my mum's that, I was born over there, but grew up somewhere else, spent most my life elsewhere and now I live here." This is normally closely followed by the inevitable, "Right... but where's home?" Yeah, good question. Or is it? What's so important about national identity anyway? If history has taught us anything, it's that the line between a healthy pride in one's country and an aggressive feeling of superiority of other nations is a tricky one at best, and for that reason the patriotic path is one most of us tend to avoid altogether. It seems *heimweh*, nostalgia, homesickness should be unfashionable if not obsolete. Also, not really knowing where you belong leaves you free to make your home anywhere, which is great, right? And yet, there's this nagging feeling...

Well, if *heimweh* is out, the spirit of 'fernweh' – *heimweh*'s opposite – is most definitely in. Another creation of the crafty German wordsmiths, *fernweh* is all the ache and longing for faraway places in a single word, especially designed to give expression to that romanticist desire to travel and explore. A particularly painful case of wanderlust if you will. Once the domain of the privileged few or truly adventurous, the will and most importantly the means to experience faraway destinations and cultures has grown ubiquitous. To the point that 'experience' is even a bit of a generous term; for the Lonely Planet generation travel often seems to be more about ticking the right boxes, yet another status symbol for the profile neurotic hipster. But cynicism aside, the quest for the new or unknown is a genuine passion, and for some of us it becomes a way of life.

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Anja Mutic turned her compulsion into a profession. Born and raised in Yugoslavia, a country that doesn't exist anymore, she works as a professional nomad/travel writer ([everthenomad.com](http://everthenomad.com)) from Brooklyn, NYC. To the question of where home is, she says: "In one way, 'home' is my apartment in New York, as it's the only place where I let the world slip away, where everything around me reminds me of the long journey I've taken to get there. 'Home' can also sometimes be a trip, a journey from one place to the next." Home being the journey seems ironic of course, but when you don't have a single home, the no man's land of being in transit can be strangely comforting. It's just you, on the way somewhere. "I feel homesick all the time," Anja admits, "and often feel I should be elsewhere. That elsewhere haunts me". It would seem lack of roots make us open, curious and adaptable, but ironically no less susceptible to 'heimweh' or nostalgia. In fact the 'modern nomad' with his or her numerous mini-lives and transient existences often feels the tug of the past much more. Because in contrast to their contemporaries, whose childhoods, youth and young adulthoods are still very much present in the shape of family homes, school reunions and hometowns, the past is where the nomads have had to leave so many meaningful experiences and friends. The tragic side to life is that we only have one. In a magical universe we could have 15 lives and existences, but the reality is we have to settle for one at a time and so people and places inevitably get left behind to some extent or other. These memories are bittersweet. They are nostalgia.

So *fernweh* causes *heimweh*, or was it the other way around? Maybe it was not always that way but in this modern age it's pretty clear the two apparent opposites are totally intertwined, if not the same thing. The question remains if all this longing, searching and moving around leads where it's supposed to, this 'home'. Whatever that is supposed to be or feel like. Well, let's consider this: A surprising insight other travellers might relate to is the strangeness of being somewhere completely alien and foreign but feeling somehow much closer to yourself than you ever have back in any familiar world where you understand when to laugh or how to eat your meal. Maybe it's something about not even being able to pretend to fit in that strips you back to your essential being. This perhaps leaves you a little vulnerable but also liberated and strangely connected. "I've had a sense of belonging to the most random places in the world, places that I have no organic connection with," Anja remarks. Our search for the new and unknown is about gaining knowledge and understanding about the outside world of course (and nothing fills the gaps in your half-knowledge like seeing firsthand the sites or sorrows you've only ever read about), but in our quest for the exotic we are often unexpectedly confronted with ourselves. In a few weeks we often learn and understand more about our own selves than we have over the course of a couple of years back in the routine of the everyday, where our senses are dulled by repetition and minds distracted by mass culture. And in this way the quest to be faraway will lead you closer to yourself, and that, after all, is most definitely the place to be.