

Not inclined to settle down, world traveler has lived from far north to far south and sometimes in between

Description

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Brenda Joyce travels light. Her one piece of luggage â?? a black suitcase â?? at the ready, the peripatetic 82-year-old divides her time between San Francisco and Chiang Mai, Thailand. Theyâ??re just two of the stops on a global itinerary that has taken her to the literal ends of the earth â?? the Arctic and the Antarctic.

â??I wanted to travel around the world, I just never thought it would be north to south,â?• Joyce said of her time in northernmost Alaska and an island near the South Pole.



Brenda Joyce sought travel, not a family. (Photo by Judy Goddess)

Not for her was the conventional life of a woman born before World War II â??I never wanted to marry, I never wanted children.â?•

Sometimes Joyce is a tourist on vacation. Other times, she rents an apartment or room and makes a country her temporary home. Hearing about an unusual way of life, an ancient ruin or historic temple inspires Joyce to see for herself.

The youngest of three sisters, Joyce was born on a farm in Kentucky but grew up in Southern California. After graduating from high school in Long Beach, she used her babysitting money to pay for her first trip to Europe before returning to finish college at what is now California State University at Long Beach. She earned a dual degree in art history and anthropology and started graduate work at the University of Hawaii before the pull of distant lands became too strong to resist.

But travel isnâ??t cheap: Joyce worked her way around the world.

She ran a used bookstore in San Francisco, worked in a kitchen on an Israeli kibbutz, and pulled shifts as a meat packer in Australia, and a factory worker in England. She cataloged films in a museum in Juneau, Alaska, and did administrative work on an island off the coast of Antarctica.

Typing paid the bills

And there was always office work to be had. Typing, a skill she picked up in high school and once dismissed as â??uselessâ?• to what she hoped would be a career in art, frequently paid the bills.

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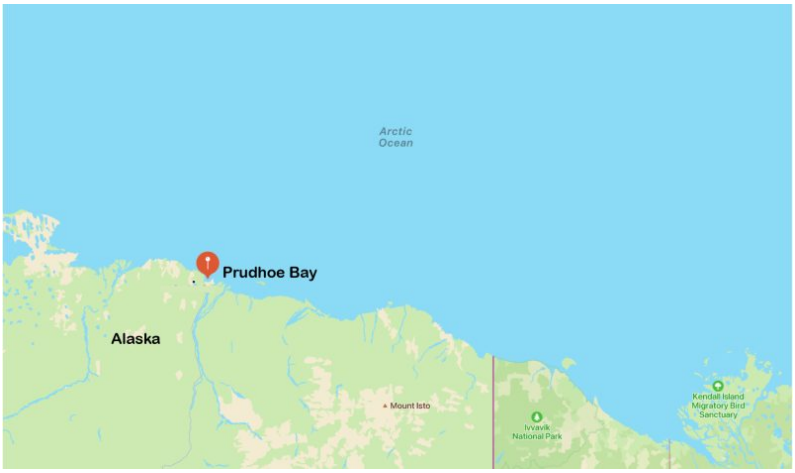
She traveled in India and Afghanistan, arduous journeys that drained her health. By the time Joyce landed at the kibbutz, she was down to 105 pounds, â??a walking skeleton,â?• she said. â??They put me in the kitchen and fed me lots of yogurt and honey. By the time we left, just before the Yom Kippur War, I was somewhat beefed up.â?•

Postcards from faraway places often feature romantic beaches and distant hilltops shrouded in fog. But it was the often inhospitable northern and southern extremes that for many years held her interest. After cataloging film for Alaskaâ??s Juneau Museum, she spent 10 years working in Arco petroleumâ??s Prudhoe Bay computer department and its North Slope oil fields. When the oil flow slowed, Arco offered to relocate office staff to Plano, Texas. Instead, Joyce cashed out her early retirement bonus and moved south â?? to Antarctica.



Alaska Prudhoe Bay Oil Field and Arctic Tundra Wilderness. (Photo courtesy of www.grida.no/resources/1621)



Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

Her initial application to work in the South Pole was denied and she landed a job as a concierge at San Franciscoâ??s City Club. Eventually, she was hired as an administrative coordinator on a project at Ross Island, off the coast of Antarctica. She held this job for two years, or rather two October-February

research seasons. During the coldest months, December and January, all but a handful of scientists who take care of equipment are flown out.

Joyce used some of her time off to visit family in Southern California with a brief detour to San Francisco. The city struck a chord and she decided to make it her next port of call.

San Francisco had its own challenge: its cost of living. She took a full-time job with a law firm but supplemented her income by subleasing a postal service/used bookstore on Hyde Street. She hired a manager for day time, while she handled nights and weekends.

A neighbood bookstore

â??I wanted to see if having a neighborhood bookstore could be a retirement gig,â?• she said. â??I loved it and it did pay for itself.â?•



Ross Island was the base for many early expeditions to Antarctica, including that of Ernest Shackleton. It was discovered by British Royal Naval Officer James Cleark Ross in 1841. It is also the site of the U.S. Antarctic Programâ??s McMurdo Station. (Photo courtesy of cruisemapper.com)



Ross Island, Antarctica.

At the same time, the landlord of the SRO she rented near Union Square, an immigrant from Thailand, urged her to consider retirement in his home country. The people were friendly, he said. It boasted a rich culture and natural beauty while its location and airports allowed easy access to other Southeast Asian countries.

Since Bangkok was home to many Western firms, Joyce figured she could find a job. But her landlord told her Chiang Mai, a large city in northern Thailand, would be a better landing spot â?? not as crowded and with Buddhist temples and statues around almost every corner.

So thatâ??s where she headed when her law firm imploded, a victim of the 2008 recession, and after three years in her used-books store, the owner insisted on a long-term lease.

She called her 10 years in Chiang Mai â??the bestâ?• of her life. Its 30,000-strong expat community made it easy for her to make friends. She bonded with digital nomads working out of co-working spaces, backpackers from many nations, and older retirees with a sense of adventure. â??Itâ??s so different from how my friends in San Francisco live,â?• she said. â??Although the city offers many free activities for older people, most of the people I know in San Francisco are struggling to live here. Theyâ??re occupied with looking back, with reminiscing.â?•

And from there, she traveled to Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, Laos, Cambodia and Hong Kong. She also made occasional forays to Europe to teach English in Germany, Spain and Holland.

Pandemic interlude

But then her travels stopped: While visiting Southern California, the pandemic hit. She stayed with her family for more than a year before being able to return to San Francisco, where she got a part-time at the Curry Senior Center.



One of many temples in Chiang Mai, Thailand. (Photo courtesy of booking.com)



Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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It wasnâ??t until this November that she was able to fly back to Chiang Mai. But unpacking her suitcase doesnâ??t mean sheâ??ll stop traveling. Friends from Thailand, seasoned travelers, have been spending time in Albania. Newly opened to tourists, Albania is scenic and quite affordable, they told her.

That sounds attractive to Joyce, perhaps as a second home during March and April, the post-harvest season when, she said, Thai farmers burn their dry stalks and the air is â??even worse than in L.A.â?•

But Joyce and her black suitcase are ready for other options that might come along. Thereâ??s a whole world out there. And when she finds it too difficult to travel on her own, â??there are always tours. Storage is a way of life for me. Iâ??ll just put my stuff in storage and go,â?• she said.

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Date Created
01/12/2022
Author
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