

# Postcards back from the edge

**Even in an age of e-mail and cellphones, there's still something thrilling and charming about sending or receiving pretty postcards from exotic destinations. That explains their new-found popularity, Kira Vermont writes**

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When Rhonda Sherwood, a financial planner from Vancouver, backpacked alone across Europe a few years ago on a tiny budget, she allowed herself to splurge on one indulgence: postcards. About 220 of them.

She travelled to 11 countries in one month, and at each locale she'd find a quiet place to sit, pull out her address book - the paper-and-ink variety - and write 20 friends and family members back home before locating some local stamps and dropping the cards all in the mail.

"A lot of people say they don't want to travel alone because they like to share the experience. When I travel alone, I write in a journal and write postcards to my family. It's a way to feel like I'm not alone," says Sherwood, who is off to Hawaii this week and plans to write to family and clients from there too.

Postcards? Isn't this the golden age of instantaneous communication? E-mail, instant messaging, cellphones and the like should be gouging a serious dent in the laborious practice of writing and sending postcards. After all, when you're in the middle of a vacation or business trip, who wants to spend the time searching the racks for cards and stamps before writing out a wish-you-were-here message longhand? Isn't sending postcards a dying art?

Not anymore, it seems. In 2003, the BBC reported that postcard popularity was waning, according to a survey by tour company Thomson Holiday; more than 50 per cent of respondents said they intended to send fewer postcards in the future, and 25 per cent complained that postcards took too long to arrive. Two years later, however, the BBC ran another story on its website stating that postcard writing was on the rise, with the number sent by people on vacation in the U.K. up 10 per cent in recent years and postcards from abroad up 15 per cent. Maybe the Greeting Card Association in the United States is right when it says electronic forms of communication seem to be bolstering, rather than reducing, paper correspondence such as postcards. The Internet, after all, has allowed people to develop more relationships - relationships

that must be maintained. And is the lack of privacy involved in writing and mailing a postcard all that strange in a world accustomed to putting its thoughts out there for all the world to see - on blogs, cc'd e-mails and Facebook?

Jeff Senior, a marketing and sales executive for Fairmont Hotels & Resorts in Toronto, has another theory: Because writing short, snappy notes to people via e-mail has become the norm, writing a postcard is just an extension of the mindset.

Senior gets a serious case of writer's cramp when he travels - even on business. Last year, he hopped on planes to Shanghai, Beijing, Kenya, Cairo, Zanzibar, Dubai, Mexico City, Halifax, Vancouver and numerous cities in between. And at every stop, he mailed his grandkids postcards - just to give them, and his grown daughter, a little thrill when the mail arrived. "Let's face it: In this day and age, when you open the mailbox, the most exciting thing there is going to be a catalogue or a bill. But to have something personal that tells the story of a great trip, now that's fun," he says.

Fairmont has noticed an increase in sales of its own postcards recently. At the Fairmont Royal York in Toronto, sales have nearly doubled since 2003, while the Fairmont Banff Springs and the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, both in Alberta, have seen a 15 per cent increase since 2006. That's why the company is planning to launch a new set of postcards that depict the chain's properties.

A few years ago, the hotel chain ran a postcard contest to celebrate the Royal York's 75th anniversary. The person who sent in the oldest Royal York postcard - with writing on the back that chronicled a stay in Toronto - won a one-night stay in the swishy Royal Suite. Of course, postcards as we know them were only 64 years old when the Royal York opened its doors. The first private postal card (one that needed postage affixed to it, as opposed to a pre-stamped version issued by a postal service) was introduced in Austria in 1869. Within a few years, picture postcards were all the rage on both sides of the Atlantic. In the U.S., however, it was illegal to write anything on the address side of the card until 1907; until then, if travellers wanted to send a message back home, they had to compose it across the photo or illustration on the front.

### **Send me a postcard**

Rondi Brower of Kinderhook, N.Y., doesn't care if the postcards she receives have scribbles over the front or the back, just as long as they show up. She and her husband, Phil Gilly, run a tacky

postcard competition out of their kitchen for friends and family - with categories that ensure everyone's a winner.

Brower currently counts 220 cards on her walls, with entries from 15 U.S. states, four Canadian provinces and 13 other countries, including Afghanistan, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan and New Zealand. Her kitchen cabinets were chosen with display in mind - they're totally flat and white - because she wanted the kitchen to represent the people who live in the house. "Who are we? Well, at this point we are the tacky postcard people," she says. Her favourite? A muscular garden gnome wearing a red hat, beard - and Speedos. Postcards, particularly odd or downright silly ones, are a fun way to connect with people in a personal way, she says. "There's something inherently friendly about postcards. There's nothing even remotely hostile about them."

But John Sayers, who is on the executive of the Toronto Postcard Club for collectors, isn't so sure about that. "When people are cruising or in Florida, they're sending the cards back north really just to say, 'Ha, ha! Having a great time here. Aren't you insanely jealous?' " he says.

Either way, collecting postcards - known as deltiology - makes a great hobby. At the postcard club's annual show in February in Toronto, there were millions of cards to covet, buy and trade. And apparently it's easy to find postcards to suit a personal passion - say, aardvarks, sailboats or your hometown.

That's how Sayer's wife got into collecting. At a show a few years ago, she stumbled across an old postcard from Iroquois, Ont., flipped it over and discovered her grandmother had written it. And they don't have to hail from exotic places to be fun, says MJ Jaffray of Goodwood, Ont. Ever since she was a little girl, Jaffray has scoured dusty old convenience and beach stores in small Ontario towns from Southampton to Port Elgin when she camps or rents cottages.

"It reminds me of my earliest vacations with my family. I like to continue the tradition," she says. Best of all, postcards don't take up a lot of space.

"For anyone who's downsizing, you don't want to collect typewriters or jukeboxes. You want something that can be put on shelves," says Sayers, who has a thousands-strong collection that fits easily in binders on two bookcases.

Of course, holding on to personal postcards has an additional purpose. They provide a tactile sense of time and place, says Cindy Coughlin, owner of Ruva Cards in Appleton, Wisc, who still has some her grandmother sent her from Europe when Coughlin was a little girl.

"I still have all of her postcards in her handwriting. That's so special. E-mails just don't do it. Who's going to frame an e-mail?"

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### **Patience is the key**

Will that postcard ever turn up?

It should. Even in places that routinely inspect most mail as it leaves and enters the country will send postcards through because they're relatively easy to vet, says Rondi Brower of Kinderhook, N.Y., who receives and sends postcards from all over the world.

But don't expect quick delivery every time, cautions Jeff Senior, executive vice-president of marketing and sales for Fairmont Hotels & Resorts in Toronto. While he once sent a postcard from St. Petersburg, Russia, that arrived within days, one he sent from Mexico took a whole year to reach its destination.

"There's no rhyme or reason," he says.

He offers one more tip: If you can't make heads or tails of a country's postal system - or cards and stamps are hard to come by - just wander into any luxury hotel and the concierge will nearly always help you mail a message home.

And just in case you've forgotten how to properly compose a postcard, website [eHow.com](http://eHow.com) provides step-by-step instructions.