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with a passion for postcards." His goal was to connect people from all over the world regardless of where they lived and whether they or not had anything in common.

What started as a small project has become a great success. After only three years, the postcrossing mail-counter had exceeded one million, and now 17 million cards and packages have crisscrossed the globe. Postcrossers are currently active in 217 countries. Some countries have only one postcrossing member (Cook Islands, Burundi, Greenland, and St. Maarten – wouldn't it be great to get a card from one of them?), other countries have only a handful of members (Tanzania, Suriname, and Papua New Guinea), and many countries have tens of thousands of postcrossers. Russia (with 44,482 members) has the most postcrossers, followed by the United States (42,877), and China (39,060).

You could say that postcrossing makes the world a little smaller. Through sharing postcards, messages, and the all-important stamps, countless people are forming new friendships, learning new languages, and swapping interesting cultural information.

But what explains the enormous worldwide success of postcrossing? Ekaterina Budnikova, an 18-year-old from Russia, thinks she might know. "The digital world is so prevalent in our daily lives that many people, from Russia at least, are fascinated by the phenomenon," she says. Ekaterina is part of a generation of teens who always use e-mail and have never written or received handwritten letters, and she finds the whole world of snail mail new and exciting. In addition, she says, for many Russians, postcrossing is a good way to practice languages – she says she's learning English and German through her handwritten postcards. Waiting for your first card is the best, she says, but Ekaterina eagerly checks her mailbox daily, even on Sundays when the postal service doesn't operate.

"My first card was from a Belgian girl, who missed her boyfriend very much," she recalls. "I liked it so much that she wrote that. I see all the cards I get as rays of sunshine: postcrossers breathe life into each piece of paper by sharing their feelings. And I'm sure that it makes people all over the world just a little bit happier."

Lucienne Baarssen, who lives in the Netherlands, learned about postcrossing from her daughter at the beginning of the year. Now she's more or less addicted. Lucienne receives anywhere from two cards a week to two cards a day. "The fun starts when I go to the postcrossing website and click on 'send a card,'" she says. "What address will I be assigned, and in what country? Who will it be?" Then the search begins for a suitable card. "Have I got something in my card catalog, or will I need to look for something

new? Since I've begun postcrossing, I've developed feelers for beautiful and moving postcards. I can put my creativity into them, and many of my creations no longer end up languishing in the bottom drawer, but fly around the world to new owners."

In a world where people give little time and attention to one another, Lucienne finds it particularly amazing that someone, somewhere in the world, will take the trouble to surprise her with a nicely chosen card – often beautifully sketched or decorated with drawings and washi tape (Japanese masking tape). "And special stamps are the finishing touch, of course," she says. "The post comes from all over the place, from Switzerland to Taiwan, and from Japan to Poland."

CULTURAL CROSSING

Tanya Thomas from Australia also finds it especially exciting to see who the website will choose for her to write to next. And handwritten mail makes her happy, too, particularly when she thinks of the postcrosser on the other side of the world who has taken the time to send her a personal card. "The cards I get are not about anything important, but I think it's great that, for a moment, I'm connected with someone," she says. "I've never traveled, and that's what makes postcrossing extra special for me, because it gives me a little insight into the culture and life of people in far-away lands."

Tanya has a point: how often do you get insight into the daily life of a stranger, written with care, rather than just a quick tweet? It is precisely the seemingly unimportant things about people – their favorite book, what they're having for lunch, or what makes them happy – that you don't read in the paper. Sure, blogs and Instagram give you glimpses into people's lives, but a message on a card with your name and address on it just makes it a little more personal.

"All the cards I get," says Ekaterina, "contain information about daily life in cities worldwide." She lives in one of the most imposing Russian places: St. Petersburg. "This city was the capital for two centuries, and is now the cultural center of Russia, full of museums and beautiful palaces," she says. "I love history and architecture, and that's why on my cards I always write a few interesting facts about my city and things to do here. But I never write the same things. I also write about what else I love: music, art, poetry. I most like to share my favorite poems."

On her blog (omlair.blogspot.com.au/search/label/postcards), Tanya shares mail she receives from people, like 12-year-old Madison from the USA: "Do you like Australia? I've always wanted to go there. And oh, do you have a cool accent? I LOVE Aus-

Here's How it Works

Go to postcrossing.com. Create a profile: enter your name and address, and say something about yourself - as much as you want to reveal. You can also add your interests and describe the kind of cards you'd like to receive (vintage postcards, historic buildings, flowers, street scenes - just to name a few). On my profile, I asked people to describe a normal day in their life, what books they like to read, and what makes them happy.

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You start by sending up to five cards. The contact details you receive are totally random: the computer selects someone for you and sends you an e-mail with their name, address, and a few facts about them. Then you get a registration number, which you write on the card you're sending (this is important). Once your card has arrived, the recipient enters this number on the postcrossing site, and then it's your turn to get mail. From whom and where you get your mail is always a surprise, because your address gets e-mailed to random postcrossers. Whenever one of your cards arrives at its destination, you may send the next - the maximum is five, for starters. Once you've sent 25-34 registered cards, you're allowed to send eight at a time; once you've sent 35, you're allowed to have nine addresses, and so on. On average, a card will take 23 days to arrive.

tralian accents! Hardly anyone I know has an accent of any sort."

Or this one: "Tanya Hello:) How are you today? My name's Liza and I'm writing you from Russia (Siberia). It's great for me to send you a postcard – a piece of my town (Surgut) to Australia – so far from me. 'Don't worry – be happy!' (this quote makes me smile) In my language it sounds like, "Не волнуйтесь - будьте счастливы!" Hope you'll like this card! Best wishes, Liza."

PERSONAL TOUCHES

How much time you spend on your mail is, of course, up to you. Naturally, not everyone will have the same time or energy to write their fingers off, or decorate each and every card and package down to the last detail. But just sitting down and thinking about what you can share in a few words is already worth a lot, if only because it forces you to think about yourself. What do I really like, and what happens to me on a normal day that would be worth mentioning? Some postcrossers aren't quite as word-minded, and for them, the fun is in decorating the mail, and they put all their creativity into making something visually enticing.

"A book of old-fashioned fairy tales from the thrift store costs next to nothing, and often has the most beautiful pictures to make envelopes and stationery with," says Lucienne. "I decorate parcels, envelopes, or cards with washi tape, homemade or purchased stamps, doodles, and labels. And I look for matching stamps. My newest challenge is writing with fountain pen and ink, but I do need to some more practice. I always hope that all my packages bring a smile to the faces of all the people whose hands they pass through, including the mailman."

Often the recipient of your card sends a thank-you message through the postcrossing site. "Sometimes they're such sincere and beautiful messages that I find it even more fun to give real attention to the mail I send, purely because I find it's really appreciated," Tanya says. "Meanwhile, I also take pictures of the beautiful things around me, which I might make into postcards."

Ekaterina sends two cards a week, on average. Receiving cards is rather irregular because, as she puts it, the Russian postal service is not exactly famous for its efficiency. "I spend quite a bit of time on it, yes, taking care to make a postcard and finding stamps that I think will fit that person. I often buy cards in museum shops or bookshops, and I decorate the envelopes: crafting and drawing are my hobbies, and sometimes my envelopes are collages I've made from Russian newspaper clippings."

If you don't like the idea of sending and receiving cards at random, you can specify on the postcrossing site that you want to "swap" – moving more in the direction of pen pals. Lucienne doesn't swap (yet) because she finds the "random" method more noncommittal, but Ekaterina likes swapping. "If I notice on a card that the sender shares many of my interests, then I'll send a card back and we become pen pals," she says. "I've found lots of artistic, creative, and unusual people like this, and I write them real letters about issues important to me. It takes a lot of time, but I really enjoy spending my evenings writing letters, over a cup of hot chocolate."

STANDING BY

As for me, I've taken my first steps out into the postcrossing arena, by sending two cards: one to Germany and one to Russia. And this week postcrossing sent me an e-mail to confirm that the card has arrived in Germany: "Hurray! Postcard NL-1844136 to MJusty in Germany has arrived! It reached its destination in 20 days after traveling 628 miles! Now you will receive a postcard from another random user. Standby!:)"

Standby. Isn't that a beautiful word to describe how full of longing I feel, checking my mailbox every day? To get cards from a few crafty types would be really cool – preferably from Japan. But I'd be just as happy with a card from a wild sailor. Yeah, this could turn into a real addiction.

