



The Wonders of POSTCROSSING

The clatter of letters filling a mailbox: is there any finer sound? When you take part in “postcrossing,” you can look forward to receiving postcards from around the world several times a week. Caroline Buijs finds out how it works and why it’s such fun.

There was a time when, every once in a while, my mailbox would overflow with friendly mail: birthday cards, love letters, notes from pen pals, postcards, or packages sent “just because.” My first year away at college was great for that, because our dorm had no phone and my mother wrote to me faithfully – a letter every week.

These days, my mailbox is full of dull gray envelopes with equally dreary content: notices to renew my driver’s license, updates on my banking rates, letters from the local government telling me they’re tearing up my street, or just plain junk mail.


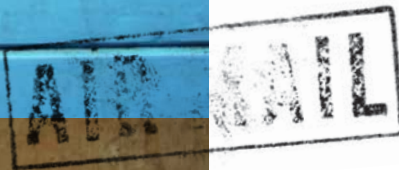
On my last birthday, when I received only one real card from my great aunt and text messages or WhatsApp messages from everyone else, I felt compelled to do something. But after dropping several hints to friends and family, it became clear that no one was particularly interested in sending me snail mail; and so my mailbox continued to be a dreary place. I had to try something else. Then I found the answer: a phenomenon known as postcrossing.

It’s a project that allows anyone to receive postcards – real ones – from around the globe. To get started, sign up for a free account at postcrossing.com (“postcards connecting the world”). You’ll receive the address of someone in the world who’s also registered on the site, and send that person a postcard. Soon, you’ll receive a postcard in return, and then you repeat the process. It’s a little bit different than having a pen pal, because you don’t necessarily send mail to the same person twice. Every time you write a postcard, it goes to a new recipient, and every time you receive a postcard, it’s from someone else.

Soon cards from all over the world will start filling your mailbox (to find out how, see “Here’s How it Works,” on page 94).

HANDWRITING ACROSS THE WORLD

Postcrossing was founded in 2005 by Paulo Magalhães, a Portuguese man who lives in Berlin. Paulo describes himself as “a geek



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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.

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.

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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 non-committal, 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. ●

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