

China Blonde

Nicole Webb

How a newsreader's search for
adventure led to friendship, acceptance
... and peroxide pandemonium

BROADCAST



About the author

Hailing from the land of the long white cloud, New Zealand, Nicole Webb moved to Australia as a teenager with her family. There she went on to pursue her dream of becoming a television journalist and newsreader.

After a decade at Sky News doing just that, Nicole (and baby bump) and James, her husband, who works in 5-Star hotels, decided to do something akin to *carpe diem*.

A few deep breaths later Nicole and James found themselves in the city that never sleeps, Hong Kong, where the family, which now included blondie Ava, survived and thrived for four years before moving to Xi'an, China, where they lived for almost three years.

Nicole, James and Ava are now back in Sydney, for the time being, where Nicole works as a journalist, writer and speaker. *China Blonde* is Nicole's first book. She has also contributed her expat story to the anthology, *Once Upon an Expat*.

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*For James and Ava,
Us against the world,
always.*

Author's Note

China Blonde was written well before Covid-19 first emerged in the Chinese city of Wǔhàn in late 2019. Back in 2014, my husband James and I almost decided to move to Wǔhàn for James' work, and at that time, the city was largely unknown outside of China.

Sadly, over the past months we have watched the world turn upside down, with Coronavirus spreading far and wide.

I hope my journey, which I share with you in this book, will give you a glimpse into the real China, a nation of 1.4 billion people. By reading about my experiences, you may come to understand a little more about the culture of China and admire its people.

My heart goes out to all those who have been touched by this pandemic.

Nicole Webb

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Not for All the Tea in China

当风向转变时，有人砌围墙，有人造风车。

Dāng fēngxiàng zhuǎnbiàn shí, yǒu rén qì wéiqiáng, yǒu rén zào fēngchē.
When the winds of change blow, some build walls, while others build windmills.

—Proverb

A lot of people assume moving to mainland China was my husband's idea. And why not, I suppose; as a hotelier, for him the next gig is always a source of angst and uncertainty: when, where, what and how?

'Where' is always the most difficult one, though.

Four years earlier, we'd made the move to Hong Kong where life was sweeter than a glass of bubbly. Why in God's name we would want to put ourselves into the middle of China, where a glass of bubbly is nearly impossible to find, was a mystery I couldn't quite decipher.

But I was the one who eventually pushed the green button.

We'd moved to The (other) City That Never Sleeps on a whim and lived a life that swung between luxurious indulgence and gritty adventure. To make the shift, I'd quit my coveted job as a TV newsreader in Australia, giving up everything I was familiar with as a mostly single woman and swapping it for an unknown identity with my hotelier beau and our relatively new bump.

Fast-forward and our little family of three had thrived under the glittering lights of a city (and a baby) that never slept.

Truth is, we'd all become rather content in our forty-third floor apartment. We could easily have stayed wrapped in Hong Kong's glow a little longer, if not forever. Despite its miniature size, we had everything we needed a swift shiny lift-ride away: a myriad of designer shops (including my favourites, H&M and Zara), a speedy train line, untold restaurants and bars, a movie theatre, a school, our work and good friends in the next tower. What more could we want?

Our family motto is 'Us against the world' and in the intoxicating land of Hong Kong we were invincible. A move could have meant the undoing of our bulletproof trio, and we knew it.

But it was time.

As second in command at Hong Kong's chic W Hotel, James, my hotelier husband, needed experience as Number One – a chance to be general manager of his own hotel.

China had shimmered in the back of our minds for months, teasing us mercilessly, for better or for worse. While dozens of potential cities were paraded before us like contestants in a beauty pageant, none seemed fit for the winning sash. We carried on in our beloved fragrant harbour city, but underneath our relaxed expat exterior, we lived a tumultuous year and a half filled with uncertainty. I couldn't commit to anything beyond a month for fear we'd be up and off at a moment's notice, which is generally the case with hotel life. Once the company made the decision, we'd be given only a few weeks to collect our things and pass go.

But until we were paired with the right city, our life was on hold – indefinitely.

The wait, though, wasn't due to a shortage of hotel general manager jobs. They popped up in almost every city across the world, from Bangkok to Doha, Macau to Seoul, Sydney to Goa. And they almost *always* popped up late at night, just as we were about to turn the lights out and leave the day behind. Eventually, I pleaded with James to stop checking his emails

so late. One last sneaky check and *bam*, our lives would be turned upside down and inside out for the next month: *Dear Mr Walkden, we have an opening at such and such, would you like to be considered for hotel GM? Oh, and please decide by tomorrow.*

We'd lie there twitching, tossing and turning as storylines played out in our heads. Bali? I'd imagine a life in bikinis and sarongs, wistfully looking out at the sparkling sea while I wrote my latest best seller. Or maybe it would be a life filled with curries and kaftans in Goa, or tuk tuks and endless foot massages in Bangkok.

By the time I'd completed my google recce, the job had come and gone.

It was then that James would quietly volunteer, 'We could always go back to Australia, you know.'

But, in my heart, I wasn't ready to give it all up. I missed my family and desperately wanted Ava, our small person, to grow up closer to them, but something in me, in us, had shifted. It wasn't so much the indulgent expat life we were clinging to, but more that feeling of constantly being out on our own, surviving life in a country that wasn't ours. It had become surprisingly addictive.

And still, the beast that is mainland China refused to back down. With hundreds of hotels opening in the Middle Kingdom, it was becoming next to impossible to avoid. One night, amid the flurry of late-night emails, a general manager role came up in Wùhàn in central China. We were given just days to decide if we wanted to take it.

We agreed that we needed to see this city (alarmingly nicknamed 'The Furnace of Asia' at the time) before making a decision, so we booked last-minute tickets and flew up for a weekend's reconnaissance.

The drive from the airport seemed like an eternity. Our car manoeuvred its way through dusty streets and across giant tangles of motorways drenched with thick grey smog that seemed to reach all the way to the ground. We passed dilapidated buildings, many just empty shells resembling areas in a war-torn city.

I tried hard to keep an open mind. 'There are millions of people living here happily,' the little voice in my head said.

Right across China, ancient towns and districts were being turned into sprawling, up-and-coming cities as rural citizens and farmers were moving out of their family's villages. With a government desperately trying to keep up with this internal migration of so-called peasants to the city, labourers worked day and night to meet the need for housing, sewage, energy and transport. It was a case of China trying to create entire cities from the ground up in record time, and it meant construction sites were buzzing twenty-four seven.

This was Wǔhàn, where hundreds of sites were under redevelopment and a million cranes reached into the sky like giant storks.

Despite having a reputation as a developing city with a flourishing university system, we soon discovered there were no international hospitals and, so we were told, just one English-speaking doctor. But the hotel, set on the banks of the Yángzǐ River and our potential new home, exceeded our expectations.

We walked into a grand lobby filled with all the bling you could imagine – many Chinese people seem to love a chandelier and the one near the entrance was big enough to light a sports stadium. The lobby was stunning, if you ignored the people snoozing on the plush lounges while the current GM ranted at them to move on.

There were fine-dining restaurants, a lush day spa plus an indoor pool. Little to complain about, really.

The burning question, though, was how long could we take refuge in a hotel, even if it had five stars?

When the current GM handed me a flimsy *brochure* he called the 'local newspaper', suggesting I could write for it – no doubt in a bid to inspire me and help him make his swift exit – my heart sank to my knees. Would this be what my career had come to?

'We can make anywhere a home as long as we've got each other, right?' I asked James, with more than a hint of desperation. He nodded, but the fear etched across his face mirrored my own feelings.

As we lay on the Westin Heavenly® Bed that night, both of us staring out across the river bathed in grey, the sinking feeling that came over

us was just too heavy to shift. We couldn't bring ourselves to say yes to Wǔhàn.

Just a few months later, a place called Héféi, also on the mainland, came up. Apprehensive after our Wǔhàn experience, I did the usual google. It was certainly no furnace, but was instead nicknamed 'Nowheresville'.

It didn't look very 'liveable', so we politely said no, acutely aware we were fast reaching the bottom of our bag full of noes.

Eventually, the general manager role at the Westin in Xī'ān, Shaanxi Province (not to be confused with Shanxi—or 'Shānxī'—Province further north) became available. A quick search showed us that the city looked attractive, very pretty in an ancient Chinese sort of way.

'It looks the most quintessential Chinese city of any I've seen,' I said excitedly to James. 'It has charm and character. Look at all those red lanterns!'

'Do you think?' he replied, clearly questioning my sanity.

I think we were both fed up with the constant uncertainty. We knew we just needed to get on with our new life. So, without seeing the city firsthand, we convinced ourselves Xī'ān would be a reasonable place to call home.



When we told our Hong Kong friends, some were shocked.

'Oh my God! Don't do it!' they exclaimed. 'It's the mainland! It's so different ... You'll never survive!' Others, though, were a little more encouraging. 'You'll be fine. Go for eighteen months, get it done.'

How hard could it be? I asked myself, trying to feel confident. But my body soon gave away my panic and my stomach became permanently clenched in knots.

One afternoon after the big decision, my good friend Lauren was driving me through Hong Kong's streets, which were pulsating with its awe-inspiring energy, when she said, 'You should stay here and have James come back to Hong Kong on weekends. Lots of women do it. One of my best friends does that, in fact.'

Considering she was born in China, her words rattled me. I fought back tears. What if she's right? Maybe Ava and I should just stay put.

Yeah, as if! I scoffed at the thought. I knew I'd rather be somewhere I hated *with* James than anywhere without him.



Five years earlier at thirty-five, I'd *almost* convinced myself, that, along with finding a lifetime partner and having a baby of my own, living overseas was definitely off the agenda.

I'd spent most of my twenties carving out my career. I'd been too scared to leave Australian shores in case I lost my place in the line-up of eager journalism graduates. As a result, I felt I'd missed my opportunity to live overseas. As for a husband and children ... well, after a number of difficult relationships, they just didn't seem to be part of the plan. I'd even toyed with the idea of adopting as I started to come out the other side of thirty-five.

That was until I chanced upon the hotelier on a blind date. My friend's friend pitched him to me as a Mr Darcy. I wasn't buying it, except for the fact that he was British.

It was a drizzly Sunday evening when we finally came face to face at a mangy old pub in Sydney's inner west. Prepared for the worst after a string of painful first dates, I arrived early, knocked back half a glass of courage-inducing chardonnay and waited.

When James came along, I was struck by his warm brown eyes and engaging smile. But it was his 'normal-ness' that impressed me most of all.

What is normal, anyway? To me, it's the ability to have a conversation that cuts both ways, the ability to understand where a person is coming from and to be present in the moment willingly, which, back then, seemed hard to find.

Because I had a funeral to attend the next day, I'd made sure to text him before our date to make it clear that I didn't have much time; one drink and I'd probably be out of there.

But on the night, James was so easy to be with that I stayed on to have two drinks and then dinner. We talked, his eyes twinkled as he spoke and he listened intently, politely. Even better, he seemed like he had it *together*, even though he was only thirty-three. There must be something wrong with him, I thought. I dug a little deeper but nothing surfaced.

I'm not overly religious, but I'd been praying for someone who was kind. That's all I'd asked for. Surely it wasn't too much, was it?

Right then, it seemed like just maybe it wasn't.

Driving back over the Sydney Harbour Bridge that night after he'd walked me to my car, I couldn't wipe the grin off my face.

It wasn't instant love, but something felt different.



For the previous ten years, I'd been somewhat settled at Sky News Australia, a 24-hour news channel where I diligently worked my way up from being a freelance news producer to business producer, programs producer and health presenter, and eventually became one of the channel's main news presenters. I was definitely in my comfort zone, roaring into the underground car park in my convertible MINI Cooper, *and* I could just about present a live news bulletin, technical glitches and all, with my eyes closed.

But it turned out that the year I turned thirty-five was to be a defining one.

Daring to do something for myself, I planned to volunteer at an orphanage in Africa for six weeks, hoping it would be the catalyst to release me from my tumultuous past – a chance to give back and change my path.

The trip was everything I'd dreamed of and more. Africa stole my heart and opened my eyes. Not one to do things by halves, I also made a documentary detailing the plight of Kenya and the importance of volunteering which later aired on Sky News.

With a renewed thirst for adventure I returned home with a steely determination to chart my own course.

As luck would have it, I'd met James a few weeks before my big journey began. Poor timing, but we stayed in touch and managed to reconnect on my return, albeit a little dubiously on my part. I was still scarred and suspicious of the unknown, but the new me stood firm. And with charm and staying power, James convinced me to see 'what may come'.

Eleven months later we were engaged, and a year after that, married – restoring my faith in what will be, will be. For all those times I'd craved a crystal ball, I finally realised I just needed to trust in the universe – with a little bit of preparation on my behalf.

As a Brit who'd backpacked his way to Oz on the sheer weight of *Home and Away's* surf beaches, James was perfectly fine with staying put Down Under. About a year into our marriage, the W Hong Kong lit up our dashboard. James instantly dismissed it, but something in me had changed. Having lost my best friend – the bravest woman I've ever known – a few months earlier to cancer, I was never more conscious of how short life could be. If we stayed, there was no doubt in my mind I would be at Sky News a decade on, doing exactly the same thing.

Is that what I really wanted?

I was finally ready to go. For the first time in my life, it seemed like an acceptable possibility. It's been said that when you have someone in your life who supports you and has your back, you feel invincible, capable of anything. With James, it didn't take long for me to know he was *that* guy – that he would always have my back, no matter what. It was a given.

One night soon after, when James and I were in bed about to go to sleep, I sat up excitedly. 'Let's put our hand up for the Hong Kong job,' I said.

He nearly fell out of bed. 'What? Are you kidding?'

'No. I'm not.'

So he threw his hat in ... and low and behold, he got the job.

And in the very same week, we found out we were pregnant.



I was thirty-eight years old and just eight weeks pregnant when we flew to Hong Kong to our new home to begin our new life.

With the wonder of hindsight, when you decide to leave your country and everything you know in your late thirties and have your first baby there, it's not just a gap year, it's a life-altering event. Living, working and forging a life in a country you barely know – and bringing up a child where English is not the first language and the culture is completely different – is a monumental undertaking for anyone, especially for relative newlyweds.

Four years later, here we were, ready to put everything on the line and do it all over again.

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Praise for China Blonde

‘A hilarious exposition of culture shock’

Chris Bath,
journalist, radio host and TV anchor, Network Ten

‘Enchanting, evocative and engaging. Nicole Webb’s *China Blonde* will inspire you to throw caution to the wind and let fate take you on your own life journey. Her beautifully creative writing style paints a picture so real you feel like you are right there, sharing the experience with her. From the sights, sounds and smells of the streets of Xian to the friendships, random medical encounters, and the emotional challenges of navigating language and cultural barriers. Nicole’s shares her real and relatable personal tales that will have you laughing, crying, gasping and gagging along. The book and the author are bold, brave and brilliant. Bravo!’

Amanda Bolger,
Head of PR & Publicity, Qantas Airways

‘Nicole is a blonde out of bleach in the middle of China. Follow her as she confronts the hilarity of medical exams China-style, the heartbreak of goodbyes, and the hope that comes with finding her tribe of likeminded misfits.’

Susanne Latimore,
Media Advisor for Sydney Trains,
former Sky News Presenter

‘An exquisitely outlaid personal journey told in refreshing detail and honesty. *China Blonde* is as much an adventure book, unearthing the quirky and everyday life in the ancient City of Eternal Peace, as it is a very personal journey of self-discovery. Either avenue, a fun expedition to inspire a leap of faith.’

Charles Miranda,
foreign correspondent and author

‘Nicole has delivered a book that is fun and lively and importantly shows both sides of life living as an expat in mainland China.’

Scott Murdoch,
journalist, Asia-Pacific and expat, Hong Kong

‘Funny, heart-warming, and shocking at times, *China Blonde* is also an enlightening snapshot of modern life and its impacts in the Middle Kingdom. It should also be essential reading for expats, as *China Blonde* beautifully articulates what it’s like to move abroad, and the people and places you leave behind – not only at the beginning of an expat journey, but when that adventure comes to an end, and all you are left with are more goodbyes, irreplaceable memories, and one heck of a story to tell.’

Natalie Murray,
author of *Emmie and the Tudor King*,
***Emmie and the Tudor Queen* and former expat, Hong Kong**

‘Being an expat is exhilarating and liberating...but at times exhausting and lonely. Nicole perfectly encapsulates the highs and lows of living abroad; whereby one day you’re ticking off a bucket list travel destination and the next you’re struggling to overcome cultural and language barriers whilst conducting the most mundane tasks. And how amidst it all, far from home and familiarity, you find your feet and your tribe.’

Juliette Saly,
News anchor and expat, Singapore

‘Most of us will never visit China, let alone an ancient city like Xi’an where language and cultural barriers appear around every street lantern. And yet Nicole Webb has literally been there, done that, and now written the book. *China Blonde* is packed with insights into life in “the real China”... but more than that, it shows what the human spirit can achieve when challenged.’

Kamahl Santamaria,
Al Jazeera News presenter and expat, Doha

‘A blend of chaos, confusion and comradeship – *China Blonde* transports you into a whole new world of sights and sounds, customs and traditions, nerves and nuances – all while holding Small Person’s hand. A captivating read.’

Nina Stevens, journalist, Channel 7 News.

‘If ever there was proof that throwing in a dream career and everything you know for the unknown – at an age when most people are settling down – will be the catalyst for growth, this is it.’

Jacinta Tynan,
journalist and author

‘No visa required, Nicole’s stories of life in China make you feel you were there. A fantastic read.’

Terry Willesee,
journalist