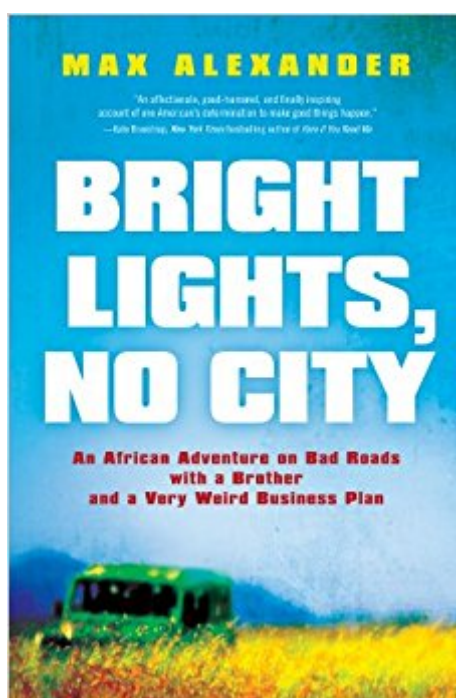


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# Bright Lights, No City: An African Adventure On Bad Roads With A Brother And A Very Weird Business Plan



## Synopsis

The hilarious story of two brothers, a truckload of batteries, and a brilliant plan to bring light--and new business opportunities--to Ghana At age 47, Whit Alexander, the American co-founder of the Cranium board game, decided to start a new business selling affordable goods and services to low-income villagers in Ghana, West Africa. His brother Max, a journalist, came along to tell the story. Neither of them could have anticipated just how much of an adventure theyâ™d find there. In Ghana, Whit's initial goal is to market a high quality rechargeable AA battery that off-grid villagers could use to power their flashlights and radios, as well as to charge their cell phones. If successful, he planned to grow a larger for-profit business based on those batteries--creating a trusted African brand that would provide life-enhancing products, services, and jobs, without relying on charity. Ghana, however, presents extraordinary challenges, and the brothers wage daily battles against deadly insects, insane driving conditions, unspeakable food, voodoo priests, corrupt officials, counterfeiters, and ethnic rivalries on their way to success. From signing up customers who earn a few dollars a month at most to training employees with no Western-style work experience, the brothers quickly learn that starting a business in Africa requires single-minded focus, a sense of humor, and a lot of patience. Along the way, Whit and Max relive their own childhood, bickering across the African bush and learning a great deal about Africans as well as themselves. Irreverent, hilarious, and ultimately inspiring, *Bright Lights, No City* challenges accepted notions of charity, shows the power of broadening your horizons, and suggests that there is hope and opportunity in Africa. Praise for *Bright Lights, No City*: "An affectionate, good-humored and finally inspiring account of one American's determination to make good things happen."--Kate Braestrup, New York Times bestselling author of *Here If You Need Me* "My boss, Bill Gates, coined the phrase 'creative capitalism' to encourage the use of market forces to address the needs of the poor. But my friend, Whit Alexander, moved creative capitalism from ideas to bold practice. *Bright Lights, No City* will scratch your travel bug, tickle your business brain, and touch your heart."--Patty Stonesifer, former CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation "I thoroughly enjoyed this adventure, which helps to prove that what much of the developing world needs is a hand up, not a hand out." --John Wood, founder of Room to Read and author of *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World* "I loved, loved, loved *Bright Lights, No City*. A tour de force! Bravo. It's perceptive, informative, thoughtful, engaging, funny."--Carey Winfrey, editor emeritus, Smithsonian magazine and former Africa correspondent, New York Times "Max Alexander has woven a compassionate and oft-times hilarious tale of the Brothers Alexander's attempt to save the world, one rechargeable battery at a time. If you have any interest in a great story or helping the other 4 billion, read this book, now."--W.

Hodding Carter, author of *Westward Whoa* and *A Viking Voyage* "A lyrically written universal testimony to the humanity that binds all people together on this fragile planet, *Bright Lights, No City* is a deeply moving and funny, can't-put-it-down book." --Frank Schaeffer, author of *Crazy for God*

"This book is filled with the passion and relentless pursuit that it takes to make dreams come to life, and reminds you that it takes compassion, luck, and humor to make history. A must read for every entrepreneur." --Richard Tait, Co-Founder, Cranium; CEO, Galazo

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Mr. Alexander combines a high-energy travelogue with an insightful exploration of what it takes to turn an idea into a profitable enterprise. The result is a wonderfully entertaining business book.” —Wall Street Journal “Entertainingly recounted but also full of eye-opening and hair-raising insights into the challenges of doing business in the third world.” —The Christian Science Monitor “A great book. You should read it.” —Kai Ryssdal, NPR’s Marketplace “Satisfies as both a business tale and a personal saga...Sitting down with *Bright Lights, No City* is like an amusement park visit...careening along, you’re in thrall to the ride.” —Fortune/CNN Money “A former People editor’s memoir about accompanying his brother’s co-creator of the Cranium board game as he tries to start a business in Ghana.” —People “A zany, surreal terror ride into the bush...At times improbable yet always comic and wise, Alexander’s tale of the brothers making a business pitch to Africans renews our understanding of service, need, and determination in the global village.” —Publishers Weekly “The author’s colorful writing and humanitarian drive make the book well worth reading. An invigorating reality check for anyone thinking about starting a

business in a developing country."â "Kirkus"Overflowing with wit, cultural insights, and colorful anecdotes, Alexander's work is an inspiring example of third-world renewal and an irresistibly readable, true-life travel story."â "Booklist

Max Alexander is a former executive editor of *Variety* and *Daily Variety*, and a former senior editor at *People* magazine. He has co-authored several books, ranging from a cookbook to business books. His writing appears in *Smithsonian*, *Reader's Digest*, *Money* and the *New York Times*. *USA Today* rated his first book, *Man Bites Log*, about his experiences moving from Hollywood and New York to a Maine farm, as one of the best nature books of 2004. He has edited many other books, including George Plimpton's last book, *Shackleton*. He lives in Maine.

Saw the original review in the *Wall Street Journal* the day of its publication, ordered it from and it arrived in less than 24 hours. That way I could read it and suggest it to my summer social enterprise class. "Bright lights, no city" is a clever take on the original "Bright lights, big city" and a spot on manual for aspiring social entrepreneurs. Who would have thought that recycling, recharging and returning batteries would be both a social and financial solution? It takes an entrepreneur with the mind that could create *Cranium* and a previous life living in Africa to put it all together. "Bright lights" is both an interesting, funny, human story, it is close to being a textbook for a social entrepreneur. Whit Alexander (and his author brother) engaged in a highly unconventional start up in perhaps the most unlikely of places. Rather than try to build a business in a wealthy country or market, Whit Alexander found and created opportunity amongst the people of a truly poor economy. It is part of the general notion of "the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid" (without the fortune), where people have cell phones but no electricity, where they have an economy and not much of a formal market (see also, "The stealth economy"). Alexander does not condescend to these people, nor does he offer charity. Instead, using a creative combination of personal and financial capital, along with a clear-headed drive to serve an underserved market, he sells "brighter/louder" to a dark, quiet portion of the world economy, and learns how to better serve his customers through the natural market of customer feedback. Embracing the locals as well as American college interns (Brigham Young), Alexander and his crew of evolving market missionaries work small economic miracles. This is capitalism without the stereotypic greed, building a sustainable market and economy through innovation, wealth creation, and enhanced human capital. You can stay abreast of their company, *Burro*, at their website ([...]) Funny, fascinating, colorful, thought-provoking, and practical. And a great education.

I thoroughly liked this consistently fascinating and funny account of a smart, compassionate entrepreneur committed to starting a battery business in Ghana, Africa. The founder is Whit Alexander, but his brother Max comes along for the ride, which is lucky for us. Max's journalism and sharp eye for the interesting and absurd (to Western eyes) detail makes us want to read all about it. Whit, a co-inventor of the game Cranium, is convinced that Africa needs businesses that sell effective, essential products to people who earn \$1-2 dollars a day. His research tells him rechargeable batteries sold on a rental plan by local agents fit this model, which he names Burro. He'll turn out to be right, but nothing in Africa is easy. Max's wonder at Ghanaian driving habits/road conditions (deadly), restaurants (the menu has nothing to do with what's actually available, and watch out for cat dishes), languages, schooling, business practices, and pretty much anything else you can think of, is rendered in a wry, understated tone that's bemused and gradually, charmed. It's this on-the-fly description of the culture and history of Ghana, interwoven with a readable business primer on the manufacturing/sales/marketing twists and turns Burro takes to better reflect Ghanaian reality, that makes the book so valuable. It's great for those wanting to start a business overseas (the bits about China should be really useful), or those who'd like to fight poverty more effectively and permanently than massive infusions of aid have done. Most business founders would quit at any one of the obstacles Whit encounters; but he just figures out an alternative approach and goes on. But the details of individual people and their daily life in Ghana--the food, medicine, advertising, manners, customs--are what will earn this book a wide general audience. It's a must-read for entrepreneurs packing to go save the world. But it's mind-expanding, too, for those of us who wish them well from the comfort of our air-conditioned, flush toilet-equipped homes.

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