

HERMIT KINGDOM

Not so hermetically sealed

BY JAMES PRINGLE

PANMUNJOM: I'm standing at the DMZ engaged in that time-honoured routine – watching a North Korean soldier with binoculars watching me watch him through my own binoculars. I feel like calling: “Hey, don't be so suspicious. The last time I was here, I was on your side looking south.”

But you're not allowed to call out, or gesture. It could cause a “provocation”, so the United Nations command says. There's a tour group at the North Korean viewing point, and what one notices nowadays is that they are indistinguishable from the tourist groups on the southern side, except they are less sloppily dressed.

The only people who don't often get to come here are ordinary Koreans, Northerners or Southerners.

We all know by now, or at least we should, just how weird North Korea is, a sinister kind of Mad Hatter's Tea-party. After all, enough correspondents have managed to get into the Hermit Kingdom, by hook or by crook, though many still tend to write Gee Whiz pieces about it.

We know that Kim Jong-il, the Dear Leader, is a heavy drinker and womaniser. Or he was, until his doctors told him to cut back on the

booze. And these days you are not very likely to meet a Brazilian exotic dancer lining up for her transit visa at China Travel in Hong Kong, off via Beijing to the Bacchanalia in Pyongyang. After all, the Dear Guide is now a grandfatherly 63.

I first went to North Korea in 1981, as guest of then ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, who stayed at a 56-room palace near Pyongyang, courtesy of Great Leader Kim Il-sung. The train from Beijing was occupied by members of the Khmer Rouge from Cambodia's jungles on their way to – well, to what, I wonder? Certainly not to see Sihanouk.

One of them scared the hell out of me by addressing me by name, saying she had seen me in that self-same jungle. She had prepared our food when I went on a scary trip with three other correspondents.

I had a long lunch with Prince Sihanouk, still the most entertaining man on the planet, his consort, Princess Monique, and their son, Prince Norodom Sihamoni, a shy lad, who was recently crowned Cambodia's new king. Then I toured Pyongyang for the first story of the Gee Whiz variety.

Still, it's good that correspondents



North Korean border guards keep their eyes on the competition

still struggle to get into this hereditary dictatorship, because of its nuclear bomb programme and chronic human rights abuses. It's one of the twin menaces facing Asia. The other in my opinion is bird flu, which could wipe out even more people than nuclear bombs.

There have been changes at Panmunjom. The two sides have stopped exchanging insults by loudspeaker, so it's quiet. On the western side, a road is being built to Kaesong, North Korea, where huge North-South joint ventures are planned.



two girls watched. Kim Jong-il was not the only person in the Democratic People's Republic who frolicked.

It's a shock in Seoul this time to find that the short of stature Dear Leader made a positive impression on South Koreans when he met President Kim Dae Jung in 2000.

He does have a quirky sense of humour, even laughing at himself. "Don't you think I look like a midget's turd?" he asked a South Korean actress he had kidnapped. When people were frantically cheering him, he told a foreign guest: "It's all fake."

Not everyone in North Korea swallows the myths. A German doctor, Norbert Vollertsen, who lived there and now campaigns for human rights, told me he was close to a general's daughter there. "She did not have Kim Jong-il's portrait in her room because she didn't like him," he said. "She watched Titanic on VCD, had a Gucci bag, a fur coat and foreign magazines."

Of course, the Dear Leader has engaged in terrorism, and kidnapped innocents from Japanese beaches. Horrible, whatever you think of the bestialities of the long Japanese occupation, or the "back to the Stone Age" bombing that the Americans inflicted during the Korean War, half a century before the North became one leg of George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil".

These days Panmunjom is not quite the Cold War time-warp it once was with its "battles of the bladder", with each side trying to out-sit the other, until someone had to rush for the rest-room.

When the North Koreans and Americans sit down here to formally discuss local problems along the DMZ, they usually get nowhere. So they adjourn to an ante-room for informal talks. A political commissar hands out North Korean cigarettes, and the U.N. side serves up gin and tonic – it seems the North Koreans have a passion for gin.

After a few convivial glasses, the matter on hand is usually resolved. **FCC**

Tourists are crossing the eastern DMZ to the spectacular Diamond Mountains, and this allows some limited human contact.

Stories about a complete lack of contact with North Koreans were always flaky. There were even romantic interludes. One correspondent, not this one, made a date with a Koryo Hotel waitress in a Pyongyang park after nightfall. Nothing outrageous, just a bit of hand-holding. (My own sense is that one has to protect locals in totalitarian societies, although, at the same time, the locals certainly know the rules.)

In parts of North Korea, nowadays,

anything goes. A colleague recently at the Emperor Hotel-Casino in a free trade zone bordering China had a bet on a Millwall-Sunderland match. A visiting Chinese official told him North Korean girls were "thinner and prettier than Chinese". Well, after the famine, they certainly would be thinner. Six girls left the karaoke bar for "beauty parades" in private suites, and only five returned ... the oldest profession meets Kafka.

It's a tyranny, complete with gulags, and life is hard. But the North Koreans were never automatons. From a train window, I once saw a soldier dancing on a flatbed railway truck as



When disaster **STRIKES**

Vaudine England was among the corps of Bangkok-based journalists who scrambled to cover the Boxing Day tsunami and its aftermath. She looks at the practical business of coping with a story like this. Photographs by Kees Metselaar.

What every journalist is agreed on, as they ponder coverage of the tsunami, is that this story kept growing. It was unlike many other natural disasters, not just for the scale of the tragedy, but for the difficulty of making news judgements and deciding where to go, when, and how.

For some, the story literally came to them. John Irvine, Bangkok-based Asia correspondent for ITN Television, with his family on a southern island for the holidays, was caught by the waves. Luckily they all survived. Equally fortunate was *The Australian* correspondent Kimina Lyall and her partner who were swept by the seas

off Koh Pra Thong and only narrowly escaped with their lives. Ginny Stein, SBS TV journalist, was saved by a story. She had left the Sri Lankan beach resort of Unawatuna for a chat with Tamil Tigers in the north. By so doing she probably saved her life.

For the leading AsiaWorks Television production house, first hint of the disaster came from AsiaWorks' managing director Marc Laban's mother. From her home on a cliff above Patong Beach on Phuket Island, Marc's observant mother made one of the first calls about the strange waves.

For AsiaWorks, mass mobilisation ensued, with company director Heather Kelly displaying her fantas-

tic logistical grip alongside former Hong Kong resident and cameraman extraordinaire, Derek Williams.

The first charter flight down to Phuket was booked by Fuji TV and carried ABC Australia's Peter Lloyd, and AsiaWorks journalists Ratchada Chitrada and David Leland. James Hutchison, also of AsiaWorks, flew down to run the feed point from which was relayed almost every live spot and often continuous coverage from Phuket. Journalists from Israeli TV to the Saudis, Portuguese, Russians, British, Americans and more, have filed through that point.

The second charter plane carried the hundreds of kilos of gear needed



to run the three-spot live feed point, which ran around the clock for weeks. Based at the open air Fisherman's Restaurant at the Novotel, on a cliff top overlooking Phuket's main beach, it rapidly became the media hangout of choice, with food and drink on demand (and at a price). AsiaWorks had to send a truck from Bangkok to Phuket to carry the extra generators which the planes refused to take on board.

"The coverage goes in phases. There are the first people in to the disaster zone, quick off the mark. Then the celebrities start coming in, and now we're starting to handle the NGOs' requests," said Kelly.

When overseas journalists visit the Thai capital, their starting point is usually the top floor of the Maneeya Centre in central Bangkok, which houses AsiaWorks, the BBC, ITN, ABC and the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand.

Dan Rather used the place to host reports before heading to the south-eastern military base of Uttapao for a flight to Aceh. When the BBC's Lyse Doucet ran live programming from the

Left: Seeking the missing. City Hall, Phuket. Top: Clearing up, Khao Lak. Below: The first tourists return to Patong Beach. All photos were taken on December 31.



Jakarta donors meeting on January 6, she did so through an AsiaWorks feed point on the roof of the Deutsche Bank Building in Jakarta. Meanwhile, ABC America's Diane Sawyer was doing live shots from Aceh from another AsiaWorks feed.

Many hacks admitted they expected the story, as natural disaster, to last only a few days or a week at most. But the scale and the time lag for

other parts of the world to catch on to the story kept it going much longer. Because the tsunami hit on Boxing Day, news organisations (and embassies and governments) scrambled to find people in the right place.

It took three days before relatives in Europe caught on to the news and started calling with concern. A number of weekly news magazines took longer as some had already

closed their New Year editions. While some thought it was too late to move after 36 hours had passed, many soon realised that it was still not too late to find something new in the story.

Once a disaster becomes a world-wide aid story, it acquires a new momentum. The politics of aid, the diplomatic jockeying and the competitive compassion add up to a story that continues to run long after every breaking-news crew has trudged through the dirt of towns such as Meulaboh, which most of the world had never heard of before.

Then the criticism begins, of course: that journalists just exploit other peoples' tragedies, or are only showing disaster and ignoring the "good news". To those gripers we say, after you have donned your protective gear and trudged through piles of bloated corpses, hundreds and hundreds of them in neat rows made by local and foreign volunteers, only then can you judge whether the media have been too negative.

Each town, each island, each province and state affected by this tsunami will be feeling the effects for years to come, in personal human tragedy, lost business, or even in new opportunities. Journalists bust their guts to



Patong, Phuket

SRI LANKA:

Fighting Infection

FCC member and GP **Sue Jamieson** travelled to southern Sri Lanka to vaccinate tsunami victims against water-borne diseases. Extracts from her e-journal:

JANUARY 3, 2005: En route to Hong Kong after my holiday in Europe, I check my e-mail at Madrid airport and find one from a friend and neighbour of mine on Lantau. Kate Evans, who survived the tsunami in Sri Lanka, planned to send vaccines to the stricken area. She'd been told that was an urgent need for them that was not being met. But she had also heard that supplies were not all getting through. Could I help? I certainly could!

Vaccinations take weeks to work. At the time of writing, the relief agencies simply weren't doing any.

During a stop-over in London, I contact my surgery in Hong Kong to order vaccines for hepatitis A and typhoid and arrange shipment to Sri Lanka. Cathay Pacific's David Turnbull comes through and waives air transport costs.

JANUARY 4: A hectic day. The flight to Colombo is due to leave at 6.30 pm. We've been told to load our supplies – all 200 kg of chilled and insulated vaccines – by 5.45 pm at the latest. But we have to collect the supplies ourselves and we're running late. My clinic nurse has done a sterling job picking up huge boxes from distributors around Hong Kong. The supplies arrive at the airport at 5.55 pm. Luckily, Cathay staff rally round.

I join Kate and her friend, Billy Gladwyn, on the flight. Kate and Billy



Sue administers the first of two inoculations

will deliver the vaccines and return straight home. I will stay on and administer them. They are destined for selected groups of homeless in areas without clean water south of Galle.

We're being met at the airport by lawyers to ensure the goods don't get "impounded" or have duty imposed, as has been happening. A British executive with the Tesco supermarket chain was charged more than £500 to bring in cartons of first aid equipment. We paid for these vaccinations and drugs ourselves. Our bill is HK\$220,000.

Kate, Billie and I disembark at Colombo airport around midnight and collect the vaccines. The airport is filled with rather desperate groups of anxious people with supplies. Safron-robed Buddhist monks mingle with assorted westerners like ourselves, all picking up cardboard boxes full of aid supplies from the baggage



How you can help

If anyone would like to make a financial donation towards the cost of the vaccines, we would be very grateful. Please either send a cheque made out to Susan Jamieson or deposit the sum directly into the following designated trust account – HSBC Account Number – 083 537894 833. The money will go to Thalpe Rehabilitation Trust, a local organisation that is rebuilding homes. All the proceeds go directly to the local people: there are no costs for salaries or administration. – S.J.

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carousel. Luckily, friends of Kate's, the Harrison family, arranged for their lawyer to greet us and smooth out any problems with customs. We get all our goods through intact. The Harrisons' villa is about 7 km from Galle and they are using it as a base to organise relief efforts.

JANUARY 5: Arrive at the Harrisons' villa in Illuketia at 4 am. We are due to start vaccinating people at 10 am!

The day gets off to a bad start. We're told by a Sri Lankan health official, who says he is a "WHO consultant", that the Government Health Authority does not approve of anyone on the island being given hepatitis or typhoid vaccines. We are dispirited and confused (this had all been organised and approved over the previous week).

So our group, consisting of Nikki and Bob Harrison, their student daughter Jennie (who'd just flown in from university in England), Bindu, a charming Sri Lankan lawyer, and me, move on to a neighbouring village where to our delight and because of our local contacts, the health officer there was actually personally willing to assist us in administering the vaccines.

At lunchtime, we meet up with an expatriate group, Project Galle, led by Alex, a resident, and Maze, an Irish lady who had been on holiday. They are trying to set up a database in Galle through which relief groups can co-ordinate their efforts. This is becoming increasingly nec-

essary. We hear there is a Japanese team doing something in one area, a Danish group dropping off machinery for pumping wells in another, a roving Hungarian medical team and some French policemen wandering about! We take this opportunity to vaccinate this group of about 30 spontaneously formed aid workers.

We then moved to the trendy but particularly hard-hit beach resort of Unawatuna, just south of Galle. The Harrisons' lawyer, Bindu, had targeted this area because victims were unable to leave for fear of looters pillaging their few remaining possessions and what was left of their homes. They no longer have running water and the wells are contaminated so an outbreak of disease appears to be only a matter of time.

JANUARY 6: Still in Unawatuna. We come across a small clearing in the rubble where a motley group of Sri Lankan and expatriate owners of newly devastated hotels and bars are discussing priorities and action to be taken. Grubby and with assorted bruises and cuts on their feet and legs from clearing debris, they rally round and find us a table on which to work. It's placed on the edge of the dirty road but we soon get an efficient (and clean) vaccination processing line going. Nikki removes the packaging; Jennie removes any air in the syringe and halves the dose for children and Bob passes the filled syringes along with cotton wool and alcohol swabs to me.

Nikki receives good news. JP Morgan is sending a team of men with equipment to clean wells!

With 500 people lined up waiting to receive two vaccinations each, I need assistance. I ask the assembled group if anyone has had any experience of giving intramuscular injections. A young Sri Lankan claimed he had done it in the army but then got scared and ran off. People are very traumatised. I was rescued by a lovely but rather tired-looking man called Reto Cloetta, owner of the newly non-existent Neptune Bay Hotel. We had almost finished when night fell.

Exhausted but wired, I stay up till midnight, chatting to assorted guests staying at the very glamorous and beautiful Villa Illuketia run by the Harrisons. Located well back from the beach, the villa has become a temporary refuge for numerous tsunami victims, including Kate and her family before they were evacuated to Hong Kong. This was where a grateful Kate had learned that desperately needed vaccines were not available.

A few temporary residents remained, including opera singer Barbara Segal and *Fortune* magazine journalist Eric Ellis. They owned property in the area and were motivated to help in any way possible.

JANUARY 7: The next morning the team finishes inoculating the residents of the Unawatuna village and we travel 30 km south to an area near Martara. The talk in the Land Rover is of ➡

new building or rebuilding works can take place within 350 metres of the beach. How extraordinary! How were people going to rebuild their homes? To make matters worse, planning permission had been switched from local to Central government, a move that might cost people, who had already lost everything, even more, not to mention the delays involved.

An hour and a half later we reach our destination: Medihah Temple Village. People here had fled in panic

from the coast into the hills. Well-organised “camps” have been established in and around the temples by the Buddhist monks.

Every 20 minutes or so, I am approached by someone wanting medical advice, mostly for foot injuries from clearing rubble, and requiring antibiotic treatment.

Members of the JVP, the local communist coalition party, assist us. I persuade a young, tall JVP officer, affecting a Che Guevara look, to help

take vaccinations out of the boxes.

Struggle to get the Land Rover up a boulder-strewn path leading to a couple of “temple villages” in Roomasala. Luckily, Bob had done a 4-wheel drive course! A lot of people had headed for this hill when the waves hit, so there were many displaced families here. The hill is famous for its wonderfully healing Ayurvedic herbs which can't be found anywhere else in Sri Lanka. According to myth, when one of the Gods needed special

COPING WITH DEATH

Buddhist monks have not only rallied to the aid of tsunami survivors in many of the worst-hit areas but they have also ministered to the dead. Richard S. Erhlich asked one Thai monk how he coped.

Cremating thousands of victims at Buddhist temples has become a grim task but Thailand's monks say their “corpse meditation” training helps them deal with the transitory nature of life.

“I was actually talking to volunteers who were helping shifting bodies in a very badly hit area, Khao Lak, into the temple,” said Siripanyo Bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk who travelled to Phuket from his monastery, Wat Pah Nanachat, in eastern Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani.

“It's just way too much for people to handle. People are, within one or two days, becoming basically traumatised, operating very much on adrenaline, getting hardly any sleep,” the shaven-headed monk said.

Many of those killed in southern Thailand were swiftly cremated according to traditional Buddhist

rites, sometimes without identification. The thousands of international tourists who perished had to have their identities confirmed before their bodies were cremated, buried, or shipped home, adding to the burden on the monks responsible for the rites and cremations and the after-death chants to chase away lingering ghosts.

Years of special “corpse meditation” enabled each monk, or *bhikkhu*, to deal with the nightmarish tasks. “Corpse contemplation, or corpse meditation, would be just literally [meditating on] a picture of a dead body, or a body at one of the actual stages of decomposition,” Siripanyo Bhikkhu, 34, said.

The macabre photographs, which many Thai monks keep in their personal possession and are publicly sold in religious shops throughout the country, include news photos of people killed in accidents, suicides, fires, and also medical autopsy pictures.

The purpose of this common traditional form of meditation is “simply to hold in your mind, very clearly,



that when you look at a [living] person, you're seeing only the external aspect of that physical person. We just sort of live in denial of the fact that we have all these organs and bones and liquids and fluids,” he said.

“We say, ‘everyone has a human heart’, but what does it look like? We forget. We are obsessed with the externals. No one wants to see the internals. But we try to see them in

plants in a hurry, he simply scooped up the earth and placed it in a different country.

The incredibly sweet, very ascetic-looking monks insist on serving me tea with Jacob's Cream Crackers. We've been on such a tight schedule that we haven't had a tea or lunch break in three days, but it means so much to them that I decide to make the time.

Interestingly, in all the time I was in Sri Lanka, I never saw one medi-

cal aid worker from any group. I couldn't understand this. I decided that perhaps they were at local hospitals.

By midday, it's time to leave. Bindu has rushed off, expecting a large shipment of paint and building materials to come in from the UK. He'd just heard that the government had placed an embargo on any foreign aid goods entering Colombo airport, unless accompanied by official letter from at least two Sri Lankan authori-

ties. He is trying to get an audience with an official in order to get one signed quickly.

The traffic is terrible. It takes four hours to get to Colombo. Time, however, to absorb the coastal damage, the most surreal being rows of ships stranded inland beside the road and railway. Galle cricket ground is covered in rubbish. There is a small yacht marooned in the middle.

Over ten thousand people were killed within a two-mile radius of Galle. **FCC**



PORNCHAI KITTIWONGSAKUL/AFP

◀ A Thai monk examines photographs of missing people outside a hospital in Phuket 10 days after the tsunami

an equal light, neither delighting nor being repelled by the attractive or the unattractive signs of the external or the internal," he said.

"It is very common with us to have [corpse meditation] pictures with us, to use them, or just to have in your hut, or have with you when you are eating, or just to look at and to contemplate," he said. As he spoke, the monk sat cross-legged and wrapped in his gown, on the grass at Phuket's

City Hall, the main volunteer emergency centre for Thais and foreigners searching for missing people or helping with the recovery.

Siripanyo Bhikkhu has two specific photographs that he uses when he practises corpse meditation. "I have a picture of a cremation with a body very visibly burning on a pyre," he said. "I have another picture of a skeleton, a human skeleton. Just as a reminder that everyone you are talking to, or yourself, is this bone structure supporting the whole thing. Sometimes, just that can be a very powerful reminder of what we call the true nature of life.

"I have quite a few [corpse photos] actually. Say, about half a dozen. Some monks like to have a lot, to have a variety. Some monks don't have any because they have them in the monastery.

"We have a skeleton hanging in a closet, in a glass case, actually in our hall. And a baby, a little newborn baby which died in birth, in a jar. We also have the feet of this skeleton. And that's on public display, so when people come in our monastery they are reminded of the transitory nature of life.

"It's very common. It sounds incredibly gruesome and almost

bizarre. But it is totally, totally normal and understood in Thailand.

"That's what monasteries are for. They remind us of the true nature of life, which is this impermanence and transitory nature," he said.

While the daily cremations of tsunami victims at Buddhist temples along the west coast are scenes of misery and despair for many witnesses, this Buddhist-majority society has a tradition that centres on the concept of impermanence.

"Your life and your body are like a leaking boat which you take across the river," the caption on one corpse photograph read. "The boat does not belong to you, and when you take the boat, you try to cover the leak. You do this until you get across the river, and when you get there, then you leave the boat without a care. And you do not carry the boat with you. So you do not suffer because of the boat."

Materialism was a trap, another caption noted. "Usually, all people want valuable things. But when you die, those valuable things cannot help you, and they can't prevent you from your final death. So it is useless for people to try to collect things, or cheat others or desire things." **FCC**

Confessions OF A **Country Collector**

Absent member **Garry Marchant** looks back over his 30-plus year career as a travel writer



I was returning home to Paris after completing a writing assignment on St Moritz, Switzerland, for an Asian magazine. Checking the map, I saw that the train passed through Sargans, just a few miles from Liechtenstein. So I got off, took a bus to that mini-state, and had a leisurely afternoon visit.

Chalk up country 242.

I'm a collector. I collect countries.

I don't just go to new places to add them to the list, though, despite accusations of some friends. I am genuinely interested in every country, curious about the most remote, unlikely places.

I didn't start out this way. I grew up in Winnipeg, in the heart of Canada. The only "foreign" parts I saw until I was 20 years old were Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. But I did find those Midwest American cities exotic, intriguing. And like the lyrics in the old song, Faraway Places (with strange sounding names), did call me.

Many of my friends did the "Grand tour of Europe" (backpacking, not staying in grand hotels) in their late teens. I was postco-



Marchant gets another stamp in his passport in St Michael

scious, and didn't start until I was 20.

On their European coming-of-age jaunt, most young Canadians visited the British Isles, France, Italy and Germany. When I finally got to Europe, I saw those countries, then continued on to Spain, then Gibraltar. So close to Africa, I had to go on to cross the Straits to Morocco and set foot on the "dark continent." (I've been on all of them, now, including Antarctica). In fact, Africa wasn't at all dark, but bright, mesmerizing, with brilliant colours and dazzling music.

Instead of returning the way I had come, I hitchhiked across Algeria to Tunisia. But I was running short of funds, so instead of crossing Libya to Egypt, I took a ferry back to Europe, and added Sicily, the Vatican, Austria, and others to my list. It is one of my great regrets, because Libya became off-limits to normal travellers, and I still have not been there.

That first trip infected me with permanent travel fever.

I'd discovered the gypsy in my genes, the nomad in my soul. A few short trips followed – to Mexico and the Caribbean. When the chance came to live in Japan, I abandoned university forever and headed for the exotic East – the long way.

I returned to Europe, saw a few more countries, and went to Japan via the trans-Siberian railway, crossing Russia, the world's largest country. Japan was the first foreign country I lived in. I taught English, worked as an extra in movies and did freelance editing.

From Japan, I travelled to Taiwan, then Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, overland through Malaysia to Singapore, then to Australia. That started my lifelong love affair with the Orient.

A year in Australia (mainly doing manual labour), then a year in Papua New Guinea as a malaria control officer for the health department followed. There, I cheated a bit. I was based on the Irian Jaya border, so on one of my patrols, I wandered a few miles into that Indonesian-controlled territory (formerly Dutch New Guinea). I didn't go through customs or immigration, but did enter the country – illegally.

Although no longer a member, I follow the criteria and the official list of the California-based Travelers' Century Club (TCC), which requires that applicants have visited 100 countries to join. I do not count countries twice, just because they change their name. Haute Volta became Burkina Faso, but I still only count it as one country. However, the former Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic and Slovakia, counts as two. That's fair, as I've been to both parts.

Other lengthy trips followed. On a year-long Africa adventure, I drove a Land Rover across the Sahara desert, with its Beau Geste sand dunes. I stayed in a brothel for several nights while waiting for a riverboat down the Zaire (it was the only place in town with beds available). And I saw elephant, lion, rhinoceros and other



DERRICK CEYRAC/AFP

St Pierre and Miquelon – the last of the five North American countries



GEORGES GOBET/AFP

I've walked the dusty streets of Ouagadougou but have yet to see Timbouctou

big game for the first time.

When I finally reached South Africa, I got a job as a deckhand on a Norwegian freighter, working my way back to Europe. Later, on an overland trip from Canada to South America, I added more than a dozen new countries, crossed the Andes several times and took six weeks to float down the length of the Amazon by banana and timber boats. I ended up in Rio de

Janeiro where I became editor of the *Brazil Herald*.

Back in Canada in the 1980s, I finally discovered I could get paid to travel. (I said I was a slow learner.) Print publishing was thriving then, and the monthly lifestyle *Vancouver Magazine* was at its peak. The editor gave me a regular column which changed my travel life. (I've always suspected that it was partly to ➤

protect himself from constant requests from freelance writers.)

So I started travelling first (or business) class, on press trips, or preferably on my own, staying at the world's top hotels. Instead of following most other travel journalists to the same places, though, I looked beyond cruise ships and resorts. On a trip to Sweden and Finland, when the other ladies and gentlemen of the press returned home, I stayed on to visit Latvia. I still have Estonia and Lithuania on my "to see" list.

In that decade, I visited places that I could not afford to see on my own. The Galapagos, the Antarctic, Stewart Island, Norfolk Island, Tibet, the Falklands. And I saw lesser-known places such as St Pierre and Miquelon - the last of the five North American countries.

Based in Paris now, I am visiting offbeat spots in Europe. An assignment took me to tiny Andorra last year, but I still haven't seen San Marino (the last of what I call the Grand Duchies of Europe). The *International Herald Tribune* supplements department sent me to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on assignment several years ago. That was an unusual destination, and took advantage of my visit there to take a day trip to mysterious Samarkand. I have a few "stans" (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) to visit.

Political events have changed travel since I first hit the road. China was off-limits then. Now the World Tourism Organisation predicts it will be the world's most popular tourist destination in a few years. The Middle East, however, has become more difficult with its political turmoil. The break-up of Yugoslavia and the unification of Germany has complicated country counting.

Despite a life-long devotion to my "collection," there are still big gaps. I almost got to Saudi Arabia in the fall of 2001, to do reports for a Middle

OLGA NEDBAYEVA/AFP



Mysterious Samarkand ... still some "stans" to go

East business magazine, but dramatic events prevented that. In South America, I have yet to visit Venezuela and British, French and Dutch Guiana (now Guyana, French Guiana and Suriname). I'm curious to see how the three

former colonial masters left their mark.

If I could only find an editor to take the story, I would love to visit Easter Island, to see those mysterious giant statues, faced resolutely inland. Although I've walked the dusty streets of such African towns as Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dialassou, I've yet to see Timbuctou - a major gap for a traveller. My collection includes a number of South Pacific Islands (Tonga, Samoa, Saipan, Tinian, Palau, Yap, Truk and many others),

but I would gladly take the cruise from Tahiti to the Marquesas.

It is a big, wonderful world out there, so many places, so many countries - 317 according to the TCC. Like all collectors, I want the full set. **FCC**

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