

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

Memoirs of a Traveling Woman

INTRODUCTION

When our teenaged son Brad was at boarding school in the Palani Hills of South India, he started writing a journal.

Ever since I was in 3rd or 4th grade people have been telling me I should start a record of happenings because my life was bound to be interesting, maybe not for me but for other Americans who have not spent their whole lives traveling around the world. At first I thought it was a waste of time. Then I began to realize that my experiences had been quite different from other peoples, but I wasn't inspired enough to get down to writing what happened to me.

Finally, I've come to the conclusion that it doesn't really matter whether others would find my experiences interesting or not, but for myself they would be invaluable, so I started a diary. Besides just experiences, I want to record feelings, thoughts, and ideas. In other words it should not only show the pattern of my actions, but also the pattern of my mind. I've already let 16 years escape recording, but hopefully my mind will still retain it.

Alas, Brad's journaling—all five books of it—ended up with far more details of what he had to eat and how often he and his girlfriend got together than of the “feelings, thoughts and ideas” that he had vowed to record.

Now, here I am at age eighty, compiling not the story of my life, but selected adventures and excursions from a lifetime of foreign living and travel. Like Brad, I hope they reveal “the pattern of my mind” as well as insights into the far lands I have experienced. My life—like many—has been a mosaic including great blessings as well as great sorrows.

From my earliest childhood in a missionary family in Japan, I somehow knew I was meant to be a world citizen. As an adult I spent twenty-five great years living abroad, on assignments with the United States Foreign Service. Some of those two to five year stays were more difficult, some more fun, but all of them were enriching on one level or another. The logical next step after my husband's retirement was to continue my traveling life in the form of short jaunts rather than long stays. During the next twelve years, accidents and illness took the lives of our two sons and eventually of my husband as well. I found it a welcome distraction from grief to indulge my unabated wanderlust. No longer anchored by family responsibilities, I was free to explore. The adaptability developed from all our moving around is what has made it so easy for me to go journeying independently, even without the security of an employer and a formal work assignment.

Just because I wasn't heading off for a job doesn't mean that I haven't worked. Over the years I've participated in a dozen or more short term projects under different auspices: English teaching, monitoring cheetahs or dolphins for scientific research, even laboring in construction. Volunteer travel—sometimes called service-learning--has proven to be an unexpected source of great delight and insight. Working right alongside the people of other countries inevitably broadens one's world view. And if local people have an image of the Ugly American, working and living together helps dispel that a bit. Volunteering abroad provides a very different perspective from what the tourist sees, and besides, it's fun.

Friends say that I'm brave to travel alone, and to such exotic places, but it doesn't seem that way to me. Anybody could do it, and without spending a fortune. In many places, solo adventures open up new doors for you, offering connections with the local people that you would never experience if you were part of a group or even traveling with a buddy. One of our sons taught me that long ago, and I can vouch for its truth. In an essay about travel, Joe Robinson once wrote "Something happens out there that cranks up the can-do spirit." To that I say "Amen."

The following episodes--a baker's dozen--relate just a few of my experiences from the past twenty-odd years, tales to whet your travel appetite and tempt you to go voyaging until you too feel "at home in the world."