

# Going global

Notes from a ,nomad

Four years ago, writer Suzan Crane packed her bags and hit the road, with only her diary for company. This is her story...

## Flight between LA and Sydney, March 31, 2003

Well, I've done it! Sold all my stuff – which shockingly included 200 pairs of shoes, just the tip of the conspicuous consumption iceberg. Said goodbye to my friends and family. Abandoned apathy, complacency and a no longer fulfilling or fruitful career. Wielding only a backpack and a sense of adventure, I have no idea what lies ahead and ponder this prospect with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. I'm resolved to keep my eyes, ears, heart and options open. No, I'm not running away, as some suggest, but running *towards*. So, we shall see where this new self-granted freedom leads me...



## Australia, April 10, 2003

G'day,

We're besieged by battalions of flies as we scale a peak in Australia's remote outback. Snakes slither underfoot and dingoes scuttle from behind scruffy brush. Roadkill litters desolate roads and each night the celestial Southern sky stages a glimmering light show as a chorus of insects lulls us to sleep. We circumnavigate Ayers Rock (aka Uluru), the giant monolith that transmutes from red to blue to violet. It's sacred to the Aborigines – who believe an energy source called Tjukurpa exists underneath the rock.

## Laos, September 3, 2003

Sabbai dee,

Hold a boat hostage as a vessel full of monks look on in disbelief! Despite proffering proof of payment, the boatman demands more money before ferrying us across the river between the Cambodian and Laotian border. Takes several hours of a united tourist front, a comedy sketch really, with the boatman unloading and us promptly reloading our bags – before he tires of the stand-off and acquiesces. A proud moment for a bunch of road-weary travellers and a good story to share along the trail.

## China, September 26, 2003

Ni hao,

Attempts to master basic Mandarin result in some ridiculous faux pas such as screaming “do not touch me” to aggressive vendors only to discover that I'm actually bellowing “I want a friend”. So frustrated am I one day that I stand in the road and weep. Only then do I elicit aid, later learning that the Chinese can't stand to see a Westerner cry.



Had I known that, I would have dredged up the waterworks much sooner...

Lose my footing and fall into a squat toilet, can't balance myself and hold my nose at the same time. One night at a family restaurant, a piece of food slips off my chopstick... thinking I sill starve, mama rushes over to feed me!

China boasts innumerable highlights though: Sichuan's spectacular landscapes, Inner Mongolia's sprawling grasslands, the fabled “underground city” of terracotta soldiers in Xi'an, Beijing's Forbidden City and of course the legendary Great Wall, which I trek mostly on all fours.





### Tibet, November 2, 2003

Tashi dele,

As we descend into Lhasa, the plane is consumed by ravenous rolling hills and voracious mountains. A sapphire sky and scattered azure lakes counter Tibet's otherwise stark landscape defined by white Himalayan peaks or undulating brown knolls.

Hundreds of pilgrims prostrate in front of Lhasa's Jokhang Temple as natives hawk their wares in Barkar Square. Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama's former residence, provides a cavernous reminder of the Tibetan peoples' struggles. A woman falls to her knees tearfully when presented with a sketch of the Dalai Lama – for it's illegal to possess a picture of their leader. Yaks and Buddhist monks abound along the Friendship Highway between Lhasa and the Nepali capital Kathmandu.

My first glimpse of Mount Everest engenders a divine epiphany and I'm left with an enduring impression: open faces and ready smiles distinguish the Tibetans, their indomitable spirit and unfailing faith an inspiring testament to human fortitude.

### Nepal, December 17, 2003

Namaste,

The remarkable journey through Tibet deposits us in the verdant, Himalayan-ringed lushness of Nepal. The people are warm and the rivers cold. I know because I'm the first (wo)man overboard when we raft the Bhoté Kosi's grade 5 rapids! Paraglide over Lake Pokhara, jagged Himalayan peaks floating beside me like delicate spectres; meet a young boy named Shiva along a mountain trail who asks me to help him write a letter. Initially I resist, believing it to be a ruse to extort money. Turns out I'm wrong and we become friends. Shiva wants to become a doctor to help the villagers – a grand and illusory dream. I too want to help, so organize a pen pal programme to expose students to other cultures while improving their English. At a special school assembly, the kids greet me with songs, flowers and rapt attention. I'm asked to make a speech (a bit embarrassing!) and then we dance and sing some more. A touching day, particularly since most of the poor kids here – and they are destitute – perceive foreigners solely as purveyors of rupees, pens or candy.

### Los Angeles, July 10, 2004

Hello again,

Back for a brief visit. Great to see friends, to window-shop in boutiques I can no longer afford. Many acquaintances ask where I've been. Reciting the list of remarkable destinations, they then shrug and ask: "So what are you working on?" "My tan," I reply, for how else to respond? Life in LA – it doesn't change. But I have.



### Thailand, August 30, 2004

Sawadee ka,

Everything seems golden in Thailand: the gleaming spires of majestic temples, ornamental Buddahs, the monks' saffron robes and glistening beaches. Spend several months studying yoga on Koh Phangan where I learn to contort my body in ways not intended, engage in water-gun combat during the riotous Songkran festival and was neck-high in torrents when Pai experienced its worst flooding in 40 years. Stick around to help extricate the village from beneath the mire of muck and am reminded that giving garners greater rewards than taking.

### Malaysian Borneo, November 5, 2004

Nama berita,

Spend the night in an Iban longhouse where traditional life carries on as it has for generations – caged skulls hanging overhead in tribute to the Iban's fierce headhunting legacy. I sleep on the floor with the host family. Lights out at eight, up with the sun, the entire community gone by the time we crawl out of our sleeping bags. Then, deeper into the jungle where the Penan nomads roam. Topless women and loin-clothed men exist here in utter isolation – the dwindling tribe is among the world's last hunter-gatherers. Few foreigners navigate this far into the jungle, much less are welcomed into the Penan's alien world. I'm lucky. My guide knows someone who knows someone, who knows where the tribe is encamped. Experiences such as these are why I travel.



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### India, September 27, 2005

Namaste,

India is a collage of contradictions – a patchwork of different cultures, castes, languages, religions and morals. A vast nation of wealth and poverty, where Bollywood stars stroll the red carpet while homeless carpet the streets. It's a country of high-tech and low income, incredible beauty and devastating hopelessness, where women swim in their saris while starlets prance half-naked on the screen. A country of holy sadhus, 20-rupee rice and lentil dinners and endless tea. Reiki, yoga, the Taj Mahal and the Beatles Ashram, Ghandi and Mother Teresa, where Buddha attained enlightenment and the Dalai Lama (whose teachings I was privileged to attend), emigrated.

For some, it's too much, but for those of us who stay, or regularly return, India possesses an invisible magnet more powerful than the pull of gravity. At once assaulting and massaging one's sensibilities, opening all channels, if not chakras, India promotes sensory overload and spiritual epiphanies, and it would take a lifetime, even a reincarnated one, to fully explore and understand this beautiful and beguiling country. One thing's for sure, you grow here if you are willing.

### Turkey, March 29, 2006

Merhaba,

A bunch of us get together at a music festival on Turkey's jewelled Mediterranean coast to experience the mind-blowing total solar eclipse. Relentless rain and mud up to our eyeballs precede the main event. Then, miraculously, the skies open and the sun returns just in time to succumb to its fate. A collective gasp erupts as the gauze of a dwarfed orb creates an eerie midday twilight followed by a luminous ring radiating in an otherwise darkened sky. Then the climax: the spectacular moment of absolute blackness, when the moon's shadow falls onto the earth's surface. As the sun re-emerges from behind its lunar shroud, the sky gradually brightens and suddenly it's daytime again. I have travelled long and far to witness this haunting occurrence – which from start to finish lasts less than four minutes. It's awesome, as is Turkey itself.



## Greetings from Egypt

### Egypt, May 8, 2006

Salaam alaikum,

I've long harboured fantasies about Egypt. After all, it's the land of: Cleopatra, mummified Pharaohs, incalculable treasures, the Nile, camels, Bedouins, the pyramids, miraculous events and Biblical sites revered by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike.

But summer isn't the best time to visit the Sahara and after a quick fling through Cairo's City of the Dead and its Egyptian Museum, I hightail it to the Red Sea for a bit of snorkelling, belly dancing, an overnight trek to Mt. Sinai's summit, but mostly for lazy days and lazier nights. There I stay until I meet Shadi...

### Jordan, June 17, 2006

Kayf hāluk?



Jordan wasn't in my plans, but Shadi's invitation to visit his home – actually, his cave – is intriguing. Only intend to spend a few days in the ancient rock-carved red-rose city of Petra but then I fall in love. With the land, the people and a man. Who could've predicted that? Spend several months living among the Bedouins who open their homes and their hearts. Attend weddings and parties with lots of music and dancing; sleep beneath the stars in Al Beidha, aka "Little Petra", enveloped by golden rock formations and the serene desert terrain. They tell me I'm an honorary Bedouin now!

### Costa Rica, October 20, 2006

Buenos días,

Am robbed twice, with a good Samaritan thwarting a third attempt, I'm extorted after a traffic collision, only to later be get a bad case of dengue fever – clearly not my finest hours. "I can't believe you've been around the world and Costa Rica is doing you in," marvels a friend who lives here. "Yeah, strange," I numbly reply days before getting robbed a second time. Clearly you need to watch your bags and your back here. But its reputation as an eco-tourism paradise is well-deserved and the country's fertile jungles, active volcanoes, serpentine rivers, lovely beaches, and diverse wildlife continue to attract a million tourists annually. Well, make that 999,999. I can take a hint!

Heading back to the USA in a few days – nearly two-and-a-half years since my last visit; four years since selling the lot and hitting the road. Will I stay? Unlikely. I'm a gypsy now, a professional nomad. And I still have much globe-trotting left to do. ☺

Photos: Studio Beerfling, Suzan Crane, Adieh DeSandries. Illustrations: def.

