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Adventurous journeys

**An Amateur's Guide to the Planet:
Twelve Adventure Journeys and Lessons for the
Contemporary United States**

by Jeannette Belliveau
Beau Monde Press, paper, \$24

by **Donelle Blubaugh**

Special to the Gazette

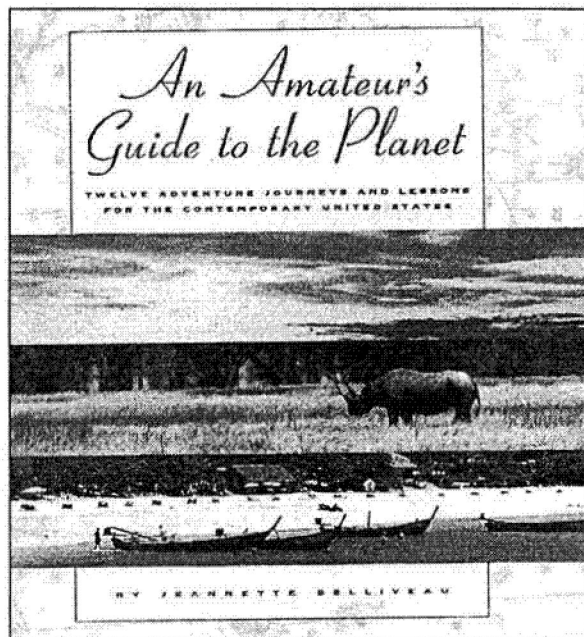
It has been too long between plane tickets. Far too much routine nine-to-five and far too little adventurous here-to-there. Unfulfilled wanderlust is a tricky disease for a book reviewer: it is hard to know if a new travel book is a cure or a curse, whether the chronicles of someone else's adventures fail to satisfy because they are not your adventures or because the author's words don't seem to meet the potential of the described destinations.

Jeannette Belliveau's "An Amateur's Guide to the Planet" falls somewhere between aspirin and miracle drug — it will get me through the day but will not postpone the disease's progress.

"An Amateur's Guide" profiles 12 of the author's journeys to some of the world's most exotic destinations between 1985 and 1994. Belliveau, who grew up in Rockville, travels on her own dime (mostly) and for her own purposes. Hence, her amateur status. She also feels that American travelers are often unprepared, because of limited attention to history and social studies in the schools and because of the U.S. media's tendency to ignore non-Western cultures, to understand the social and environmental significance of what they see in foreign lands. Hence, we travel as uninformed amateurs. The lessons of the title refer to her efforts to expand her understanding of the people and places she met.

Belliveau offers a refreshing, independent perspective. Her book is not a guide in the usual sense. Readers will not find lists of recommended hotels in Bali or tips for locating safari guides in East Africa. There is not a concierge in sight. What Belliveau has learned — and what she would like readers to learn — is the art of knowing a place by meeting its people, not just its tourist sites.

Belliveau is an advocate of the decide-and-depart school of travel: get to where you want to go and trust that nice people will help you with the details once you arrive. In this way Belliveau and her companions glimpsed a family of rare indri lemurs in Madagascar and photographed a pair of indolent cheetahs in Kenya. Her methods are not for the faint-hearted. A single-engine Cessna flew her over Borneo's devastated rain forest; she conquered her Jaws-bred fears to



swim with sharks in Polynesian lagoons.

I enjoyed Belliveau's straightforward, ground-level accounts of stunning scenery in Tahiti, less than smooth sailing in the Aegean and smothering heat in Burma. Her side-bar essays are brisk and informative. They offer well-documented insight into Chinese emigration, the nature of poverty in Burma and the downside of development in Thailand. I wish Belliveau had stopped there.

Instead she has punctuated both her travel narratives and the more scholarly essays with numbered "lessons." At their best these are mild reminders of the significance of a particular scene or situation. Generally, they are intrusive, bold face statements of the obvious. Lesson number 13 from China for example: "The scene confirmed that as usual, native art faithfully records the look of a region." Often they are weakly humorous one-liners. In Brazil, where the regional cuisines are varied and delicious, Belliveau remarks, "A country that encourages ketchup on popcorn has little chance of joining the ranks of gastronomically advanced nations."

The book is further marred by a confusing layout and frequent use of very small, hopelessly murky black and white photographs. These elements, unfortunately, distract readers from Belliveau's energetic affection for the dustier corners of the world. Belliveau is a convincing proponent of a less-is-more approach to travel: the less popular destinations for travelers will be the most rewarding for adventurers. I am willing to take that advice and ignore the "lessons."