

## TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

### An Amateur's Guide to the Planet

by Jeannette Belliveau

Beau Monde Press, 247 pp., \$24

While working as a financial editor for the BALTIMORE SUN and later as a graphics editor for the WASHINGTON POST from the mid 1980s through early 1990s, Jeannette Belliveau took advantage of every vacation opportunity to get off the beaten track—journeying from Borneo to Madagascar, from Burma to the Yucatan Peninsula. In many ways she fits the profile of the growing number of American adventure travelers—avoiding package tours and high-rise hotels and favoring local buses and family-run accommodations. She differs from most in the extent to which she has documented her experiences, drawing on her journalistic training.

This unusual book—subtitled "Twelve Adventure Journeys and Lessons for the Contemporary United States"—is part travelogue and part social commentary. The descriptions of her journeys are personal, detailed, and engaging. Throughout, there are interesting sidebar discussions on topics ranging from the possibility of Asian influence on pre-Colombian Mayan culture to the impact of tourism on contemporary Balinese culture. She is a traveler who is interested in what lies under the surface appearances of a place.

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primarily in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. She explores the question of racial democracy in Brazil, the changing role of missionaries in Borneo, family relationships in Burma, and the relationship of U.S. poverty to conditions in the developing world.

An extensive bibliography attests to the considerable research Belliveau undertook to find answers to the many questions raised in her travels. It is clear that she has been open to a wide range of experiences and has an honest respect for local peoples. Her philosophy of travel, she says, ". . . parallels the constructivist approach to teaching . . . in which students are first allowed an exploratory period of handling materials, with concepts introduced later."

Belliveau's observations are insightful, yet one wonders about missed opportunities. Is it possible that her interactions with local people might have been more meaningful as a result of some research prior to undertaking her adventures? Would her observations have been even more insightful?

She writes that her trip to the Yucatan Peninsula in 1992 with her sister and two friends began "as with most of our trips, [with] an original goal to relax . . . and evolved into much more: cultural fascination." That fascination is focused primarily on the pre-Colombian Mayan culture, with visits to archeological sites such as Tulum and Coba. A description of pyramids at the remote and mysterious Coba and a comparison with those at the even more stunning Tikal—which she visited on an earlier journey to Guatemala—is accompanied by an extensive sidebar on the fear of climbing. But what seems missing here are some thoughts about contemporary Mayan culture and a discussion of the impact of tourism on local peoples, as in the chapter on Bali.

Equally useful would have been a discussion—in connection with that particular trip—on the detrimental impact that large-scale tourist developments such as Cancun can have on the natural environment. Belliveau describes the wonderful experience of walking down an unmarked path south of Akumal to discover a hidden gem of an undeveloped lagoon. Sadly, present plans of the Mexican government call for further hotel and

condo development on such lagoons. Coral reef destruction, water table depletion, and the relocation of local people are often the results of such planning.

It is in the promise of the sub-title—lessons for the contemporary United States—that one is particularly disappointed. The premise is meaningful but unevenly executed. Belliveau reflects on the environmental lessons to be learned from a fragile island ecosystem such as that of Madagascar and its relationship to habitat requirements in the United States. But other "lessons" are more a matter of travel tips such as "to enjoy Tulum, arrive early in the morning, when only its giant iguanas and a handful of tourists are likely to be present." Others are simply amusing: "In surveys and essays, heaven is surprisingly frequently depicted as a place where lots of baseball is played."

The overall lessons that Belliveau sets forth at the conclusion of AN AMATEUR'S GUIDE TO THE PLANET make it

clear that she sees travel as an opportunity for reflection and that planet Earth is the most stimulating classroom.

*Guy Wulfing is fellowship support services director for Ashoka: Innovators for the Public in Arlington, Virginia.*

