

# BELLIVEAU URGES VACATIONERS TO TAKE THE PATH LESS TRAVELED

BY MARGOT IVERSON

“Travel makes events in vaguely imagined faraway places as tangible as a pebble caught in your shoe,” Jeannette Belliveau writes in her newly published book “An Amateur’s Guide to the Planet: Twelve Adventure Journeys and Lessons For the Contemporary United States.” These words could serve as a distillation of Belliveau’s whole book, in which she describes in day-by-day detail 12 different trips she has taken and the changes each caused in her perception of herself and the United States.

A journalist and former editor at the Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun, Belliveau writes in simple, clear language with an enthusiasm and thoughtfulness which draws in the reader. All but one of her trips are to non-European destinations, and she persuasively demonstrates that the frustrations Americans experience in third world countries — especially crowded, unreliable transportation and bureaucratic nightmares — are more than compensated for by insight into the lives of people living in very different cultures than our own.

Belliveau manages to do this without glossing over the unpleasant reality of situations such as taking an obscenely overcrowded — by American standards — 32-hour train ride through China. Nor does she pretend to be untouched by the weariness of traveling, and readily admits, “My love for travel is not pure. Excitement and fun blend with worry and sensory overload.”

In her reflections on her travels, Belliveau returns again and again to the United States and lessons it could learn from other cultures. In her chapter on Burma entitled “Shimmering Heat and Radiant Buddhists; Burma and Lessons on the Nature of Poverty,” she describes one of the poorest countries in the world and yet one which impresses her with the cheerful dignity of its Buddhist citizens. “The Burmese reverence for knowledge and kindness challenges notions that a lack of money inexorably leads to pathologies ... Westerners often find Burma to be the single place that most alters their outlooks,” she writes.

The most problematic part of Belliveau’s book is the format. A large soft-

bound paperback — resembling a textbook — which is accurately described in the press release as having a “fun, magaziney look,” the book makes extensive use of photographs, graphs, sidebars and quotes. Although this graphical use of the pages is frequently effective and reflects Belliveau’s work as graphics editor, the resulting book is an ungainly size for a travel book. In addition, Belliveau chooses to intersperse her text with “Lessons” which offer sound-byte summations of points Belliveau views as significant but which I found condescending and distracting. The book is clear enough in its points that it should do without them.

Yet while she condescends to the reader, Belliveau never condescends to the people she meets on her travels and describes in her book. Anyone considering a trip to Asia, Africa or Latin America should read “An Amateur’s Guide to the Planet” before embarking on their travels. Belliveau’s evocative descriptions of individuals and places, her suggestions on the logistics of independent travel, and her references to both literary travel accounts and sources of sociopolitical information (check out the web site of the lonely planet guidebooks: [www.lonelyplanet.com.au](http://www.lonelyplanet.com.au)) are all reasons to peruse the book. In addition, “An Amateur’s Guide to the Planet” holds special appeal for travelers interested in sailing and “roots” trips exploring their backgrounds. Belliveau’s French background is an integral part of the book as is her husband’s African ancestry, and her descriptions of the mixed emotions of black Americans who visit Africa and Brazil are especially interesting.

