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For my mother, June.
Preface

When I was a small boy, my little sister and I used to dig in the dirt often. We were told we were digging holes to China. We thought that was amazing. Of course, a lot of parents played this trick, and an actual direct hole would probably end up in the Indian Sea.

Some fifty years later traveling all over China looking for “beauty spots”, I began noticing how similar many places were to places in the United States. Lush mountain waterfalls south of Liuzhou were remarkably like where I lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains. North Captiva and Weizhou Islands are spectacular islands saved by nature. Similarly, hunting elephants in Shanghai compares to tracking panthers in the Everglades, tourists in Ding Darling National Wildlife Area to “monkeys” in Nanning, a river-rafting town in Tennessee to a boating town on the Li River, and crazy Shenzhen, where I taught school, to weird Austin, Texas where I now live. All interesting places on opposites ends of the world…places I hope you'll enjoy reading about, seeing photos of, and perhaps visiting yourself.

Some of these comparisons are a stretch—elephants to panthers and volcanos to hurricanes, but the point is we, and the places we love, are more alike than different. Perhaps the beauty we see in nature is the beauty we want to see in ourselves. We hope to see something more stable and enduring, an astute environmentalist said on a PBS special about our national parks. Designed by God and to be protected forever, another one said. A new theory is outside flora bacteria invades our inside bacteria to create a continuity with messages, networks, and mysterious connections. O.K.

Most of these places are so popular they are overrun with tourists. Our wildlife, reefs and countryside are diminishing. Elephants in America will no longer have a viable breeding pool soon. But China has managed to save the last of their wild herds and increase small populations. We are saving the Florida panthers, but a huge portion of pink flamingos aren’t returning to Southern China, and coral reefs are disappearing at an alarming rate.

Take some time in your busy day to turn off your electronics, and get out to places like these to soak in all the beauty and love.

These true stories start out in Copperhill, Tennessee after I lose my home, then go to some happier times in Florida, Georgia, and China, then back to China to learn about love and end here in Austin, Texas, where there are some happy endings.
A little foolishness, enough to enjoy life, and a little wisdom to avoid the errors, that will do.

-Osho
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Dead Man's Gambit

The sign hanging from the dead man's neck read "Do You Know This Man?". Sitting in the window display of Abernathy's Funeral Parlor, the man seemed to be pleading for help even in death.

Caught cheating at cards, justice came quick to this gambler in the mining town of Copperhill, Tennessee. Over one hundred years later, the picture window display harbors booths for a popular Mexican restaurant and a photograph of that dead man hangs on the wall.

Different kinds of gamblers come here now: "river rats" shooting nearby Ocoee rapids, aging bikers who tool the winding mountain roads on their Harleys, and tourists riding on the excursion train from Blue Ridge.

I sit at the bar nursing a beer. It seems surreal, this mix of people. But then, Copperhill always has been. Everyone's traveling, including myself.

All my household stuff is for sale at auction across the street. Oriental rugs, small appliances, and framed art will all go for pennies on the dollar. What's left I'll keep to sell at flea markets along my travels. My old pickup truck with my dog, Value Jet, cat, Dirty and camping equipment await me outside. I'm watching them now, as old Dirty doesn't like the idea of leaving our huge mountain lake log home the bank made me sell.
I don’t know the whereabouts of my Chinese wife. I begged her to stay with me and take a doctor’s position offered to her, but when the money ran out, she went off to work in the lucrative massage business. I get e-mails from her saying she’s in Atlanta, Augusta, and San Antonio. She even sends me money via Western Union, but not her address. I got “cat-fished”, but I think I still love her.

What better time to hit the road and write about it? I just wanted a larger grub stake, but I hope to continue selling photographs and have about 40 large framed ones in the truck. Little did I know what I was in for. But then, life is an adventure, and I’m a writer-photographer. I’ve led a colorful life…and I'm still coloring at 62.

So off we go into the Cohutta Mountains. The largest wilderness area east of the Mississippi is surrounded by the Chattahoochee National Forest, containing clear trout streams, waterfalls, bears and second-growth timber from the mining companies cutting it all down. Now the old logging rail trails are hiked by millions into the heart of some of the most beautiful spots in America.

We find a free site, although there are better campgrounds with water and outhouses, but cost money. I barely get the huge old tent up before a lightning storm nearly brings it down. Value Jet and I sit on the old mattress I brought. Dirty is freaking out, so I hold onto him and sing old Cat Stevens songs. I pray to God to help and direct me.

Next morning Value Jet and I walk down the gravel road which runs around the perimeter of the wilderness area to a lookout point. Dirty just hides in the weeds, completely pissed off, as he normally walks with us.

Having lived near this wilderness area for twenty years, I've hiked many of the trails. The Jack's River waterfall and the headsprings of the Cannasuaga River are my favorites. However, with the dog and cat I stay on the perimeter road for now.

An old wooden platform jaunts out over the vista of seemingly endless blue mountain ridges. Somewhere down there is Copperhill and Blue Ridge.
A hiss near us makes me jump and hold onto Value Jet, as a small copperhead slithers off the platform a few feet away. Value, a short-haired German pointer bull-dog mix is afraid of nothing, and acts like this is a wonderful adventure.

I took him in as a stray, as none of the neighbors wanted him. I named him Value, as he had cow markings like the box my computer came in with “valued customer”. Then I clocked him running nearly 30 miles per hour, and added Jet, after the old airline.

We stay there for a month. Everyday Value and I walk the old gravel road. If Dirty follows, we take two short walks a day. I drive the rough fifteen-mile round-trip to Blue Ridge for supplies when needed. A ranger finally stops and asks how long I'd been camping, which I answer truthfully, and he tells us to move at least five miles, as the free camping is limited to two weeks at any one place.

So, we move to a camp site 20 miles on the western slope of The Cohuttas on a gorgeous mountain stream rushing down from the top.
Dirty runs out of the truck as soon as we arrive. I call and look for him all evening. Just above us are little caves I found out were full of copperheads, and I have nightmares of Dirty getting bit and dying in some hole. But he grew up surrounded by many acres of pristine woods and use to tackle possums and growl at bob cats. He brought hundreds of birds and mice to my doorstep. I think maybe he’d rather be in control of his own destiny. But I feel bad.

My neighbors, a young couple, help me set up the big tent. I cook them a chicken dinner, but the liquor they bring, added to my beers, gets to be too much. I just want to go to bed. Then a bunch of rowdies come in, wade across the stream, and set up in a no camping area and the trouble begins. My neighbors join into the howling and dancing, and the next thing I know the sheriff and rangers are here arresting people.

Value and I go to bed. The next morning, we walk all over searching for Dirty. I am heart broken. He was born on my cabin porch eighteen years ago. He never showed up again. We stay our two weeks free, hiking, writing and photographing, then move down the mountain to a cheap motel so we can sell some of my photos at a huge flea market.
I don't sell anything. My prices are cheap. These people just aren't looking for art. The money's getting low. I plan to go to another free recreation camping area, but just then our government shuts down because a new budget couldn't get approved and all federal forests are closed.

So, we head back to Blue Ridge to the cheapest campground I can find. My hip, which has bothered me for years, makes standing up for any length of time unbearable. I can't afford to go to the walk-in clinic.

A nice man I meet at the dog park where I take Value to get free dog food, tells me of a great free place right on Lake Blue Ridge in the Chattahoochee National Forest near his home.

We check it out, then move. A million-dollar view of the lake and a wonderful stone beach for fishing. I apply for food stamps in town and see a flier for a church offering free hot meals. I go there and meet John and Elaine who let me take a shower, wash my clothes, and get a winter jacket, as it is starting to get cold. I start going there once a week and read about this church, a Seventh-day Adventist. I start going to the Saturday service. I feel God and a lot of love.

I can’t find a job anywhere so I start applying for teaching positions in China at free Wi-Fi locations. I had been offered several when I was there. Soon I find out most schools don’t want a 62-year-old, but I do have a B.A. in English and some are interested.

I find a free place where I can show and sell my framed photographs but sold nothing after three weekends. Don't even have enough gas to get back to the campsite, when a
couple pull up in a fancy car and ask for directions. The woman spots an old oil painting my sister did of my mother when she was a little girl, and buys it for $20. There are miracles.

It's getting cold and rainy. John buys me tape and tarps as the tent is leaking badly. Then it starts snowing and Value and I huddle together on the old mattress for several days. One of the neighbors driving by brings a large propane gas heater he says Home Depot donated to me. I use it sparingly and get through a week of snow and freezing rain. I thought the tent was adequately vented, but wake up one morning coughing and choking with the sound of the empty gas container screeching. Was God trying to tell me something?

A doctor and his wife at the church offer their empty log home for me to use. I've put in about a hundred applications for teaching jobs in China and decide I should just go there. So, I borrow $2,000 from my mother, find a home-finding agency for my beloved dog, give my stuff to the church and park my truck at the title agency who have the title. John and his wife drive me to the Atlanta airport and I head out for even more misadventures. Little did I know I would be living in a church, and teaching fifth grade math to Chinese kids who knew more than me.
Weizhou Island is the largest and the youngest extinct volcanic island in China, and probably the most beautiful. Formed by lava most recently 7,000-15,000 years ago, there are unique caves and cliffs, small mountains topped with banana plantations and is surrounded by coral reefs. The water is a clear jade color and the beaches are golden brown. Six by five kilometers, a small town in its harbor has indoor/outdoor restaurants with tanks sloshing full of live seafood for you to pick your dinner. The selection is astonishing and dirt cheap.

We get off the ferry from Beihai to be greeted by the taxi from our hotel: a 90cc Honda with a sidecar and driver. My wife sits behind the driver. I pile on our luggage and jump into the sidecar. We barely make it up the hill to a dilapidated four-story stucco building with a huge, nonfunctional clock on top.
The lobby is three stories of cracking plaster and wood beams, sparsely furnished with long wooden tables of glass cases full of preserved fish and lobsters. An adjoining room is lined with huge old photos of what looks like the history of this little island.

The staff is out on the veranda, which affords a panoramic view of the harbor. They are
playing cards, but break it up and clamor up to us with smiles. All of them are Chinese and Vietnamese women.

They take us to a stark room on the third floor with two little beds, an old black and white TV and traditional squat toilet with a hanging shower hose. No worries. We don’t plan to spend much time here.

Back on the veranda they serve us scrambled eggs with onions and garlic, huge roasted scallops, and cold bottles of beer. The view and weather are fabulous.

The next morning another taxi arrives for us, this time a much larger motorcycle tricycle, with a large seat in the back. First to Drippy Rock. Red-orange lava cliffs worn into caves on the coast. Ying goes down the many stairs without me to take this photo. Next, our guide takes us to a banana plantation. Ying pumps water for a young woman doing her laundry by hand and we sample fruit I’ve never seen before. Where are the monkeys? The monkeys are us and we act accordingly.
That evening they serve us what I think is pork, but I have unknowingly eaten cat and dog. Oh, I see huge rats below us in the scrub. The scallops and oysters they also bring us are some of the best I've ever eaten.

We go into the room full of huge old photographs. From 1869-1879 the French built a
Gothic-style church in Shengtang Village just up the mountain. In 1880, they built another Catholic Cathedral. Many large, framed photos of Chinese settlers, the plantations, and nearby islands hang on the walls.

We spend the next few days exploring the beautiful beaches, nearby islands, churches, and markets. I think this is a place I'd like to come back to live and write and photograph. It's a place saved by nature, and a grand one.
The Island Saved By A Hurricane

Many people confuse North Captiva with Captiva, and it’s not hard to understand why. For countless eons, the two were one island. Then, in 1921, a powerful hurricane sliced them apart.

Today, only a 100-yard-wide channel separates the cars that swarm over Sanibel and Captiva from the lush, 550-acre hunk of unspoiled Florida known as North Captiva (on old maps it’s Upper Captiva). Preservationists remain thankful that Mother Nature provided a deep and swift channel to discourage bridge-builders.

Twenty years ago, after the Sanibel causeway was completed, many people thought that a bridge would be built to connect North Captiva to the mainland. That bit of speculation fired a real estate boom on the island; six subdivisions were plotted and about 400 lots were sold. My family bought several, and I often went and camped there.

But North Captiva came under the state’s eye as a good acquisition for future generations because it was the type of land that was rapidly becoming extinct through development. In late 1970, under the auspices of the Environmentally Endangered Land Act and the Conservation and Recreational Land Act, the state purchased the southern three-fourths of the island.

These 350 acres of mostly cabbage palms, mangroves, and pristine beach look much the same as when Spanish explorers first saw them four centuries ago. Like state-owned Cayo Costa Island to the north, it is the last undeveloped barrier-island land in Florida.
The state considered buying the rest of the island but, after calculating the cost of buying out 400 owners backed off. After all, only a few stilt houses and fish camps existed on the land. There were no paved roads, no electricity, and no accessibility except by boat.

In 1980, the Realty Development Group of Camden, Maine, bought 32 acres that stretch from the Gulf to Pine Island Sound. Electric and telephone lines were cabled underwater, and the rustic fisherman’s retreat was finally connected to the 20th century.

Phil Kinsley, the original developer, with one of his stilt homes.

A village of 34 stilt home units in 17 cluster townhouses now gaze out over Safety Harbor. Like the luxurious island homes that have also been built, the development has been skillfully planned to harmonize with local surroundings. Banning exotic plants (except maybe bananas), builders have left as much of the natural vegetation as possible. Even the gopher turtles were captured before construction and returned near their old holes when building was completed. An attractive common area includes a fresh water lake, tennis courts, pool, clubhouse, and bird towers.
Abandoned “ice house” on the Pine Island Sound side of island is where fishermen kept their catch until transporting them across the sound to the mainland at Punta Rasa.

The atmosphere is much like that of Sanibel before the causeway was built. No one seems to wear a watch. The sun and moon calculate time. Golf carts are the main mode of transportation, and the biggest excitement is likely to be a reckless cart race on a moonlit sandy lane.

There are only two places to eat on the island. One, the Over the Waterfront Restaurant at the Safety Harbor Club, was originally a bunkhouse for the mail boat crews at Punta Rassa (where the ferry used to depart for Sanibel). Built in the 1920’s, the building was barged to its present site at the end of a wooden dock to catch the bay breezes. Island burgers and key lime pie (made from their own trees) are among the specialties. The owners, Scott, and Jane Gilbert, only open for dinner when traffic warrants, but will cater party food upon request. If you want a drink, it’s strictly BYOB. In fact, it’s a cost-effective idea to bring in most of your own provisions.

The other eating place, located in one of the oldest buildings on the island, is called Barnacle Phil’s. It’s the only place you can get a cold beer or glass of wine. They also serve delicious seafood. (author’s note—this has changed a lot, so check before you go) Kinsley, is the owner of Barnacle Phil’s and the easiest way to find him, I am told, is to watch for his little Cessna bumping down on the private airstrip. If I wanted to learn about life on North Captiva, I should talk with Phil.
The first time I saw Kinsey, I was standing on the beach at the end of the grass runway watching the sun set. Suddenly this little plane was just over my head, popping into the air over the breaking waves.

The second time I saw Phil, I was strapped in next to him. By then my fears had been quelled by Safety Harbor employees who informed me that Phil was a veteran WW II flying instructor. At any rate, I had no time to think about it. Seeing these mangrove-shrouded islands from a few hundred feet in the air was a breathtaking experience (see *Taming Those Darling Tourists*).

A few times a year the water here is as clear as in the Keys. It was on one of those days that Kinsey says he spotted what may be an old wreck lying in about 30 feet of water off the beach of North Captiva. An antique silver mug was found nearby recently, he said, and someday he plans to drop a marker and dive it.

Later that day, Kinsey took me out to his cottage, built on stilts on a sand bar. Boats coming into Safety Harbor navigate the narrow channel below his porch.
This is the Cabbage Key bar where everyone posts a dollar and signs it. Jimmy Buffet is reputed to have written *Cheeseburger in Paradise* here. Great burgers. Built on top of Calusa Indian mounds affording fantastic views of the International Waterway, it is only a few nautical miles from North Captiva Island.

For an even more breathtaking experience of old Florida, take the ferry to Cayo Costa Island, the next island north of North Captiva, also without bridges. The entire island is a state park and there are no homes or residents. There are some plywood bunk houses directly on the beach that can be rented cheaply (book way ahead). Here you can experience pristine Florida like nowhere else. No air conditioning! Bring the bug spray. Outdoor shower.
Archeologists digging in a shell mound on nearby Pine Island. Calusa Indians built these mounds with clam shells up to thirty feet high, and probably built their homes on them to be above the water.
Hunting Elephants In Shanghai

Captain Kirk and the chubby insurance lady didn't invent the “name your own price” technique, although copyrights have been taken out. Chinese were likely doing it with bead boards a thousand years ago. Now Chinese use hand-held calculators. The totally-equipped seller will show you her web site catalog with Pay Pal on a tablet as you walk by. They don't need TV; they've got you in the palms of their hands.

“Duo shao Qian?” you can ask in mandarin, but they all know “how much?” They show their high price in their calculator and hand it to you. You punch in your low-ball price. Then the haggling and fun begins.

My Chinese wife, a great haggler, and I search through seemingly endless markets of Shanghai for elephants of jade, wood, leather, whatever. We love collecting them and reading and seeing the real ones.

Elephants are highly intelligent and self-aware. They have a very large and highly convoluted neocortex, a trait also shared by humans, apes, and certain dolphin species. Asian elephants have the greatest volume of cerebral cortex available for cognitive processing of all existing land animals.

Asian elephants are endangered. Their population has declined by at least 50% over the last three generations. In 2003, the wild population was estimated between 35,000 and 45,000 individuals in Asia, and less than 300 wild in China. Poaching in Asia and Africa is now attracting well-armed, well-funded thieves, including terrorists groups, as ivory is worth much more than gold.

Feral captive elephants have lived beyond 60 years when kept in semi-natural situations, such as forest camps. In zoos, elephants die at a much younger age and are declining due to a low birth and high death rate.

The overall infant-mortality rate for elephants in American zoos is a staggering 40%—nearly three times the rate in Asian or African wild. For every elephant born in a zoo, an average of two die. At that rate, the 288 elephants inside 78 US. zoos could be “demographically extinct” within the next 50 years because they'll be too few fertile females left to breed, according to zoo-industry research.

But back to our chase…once you focus on a purchase, a peculiar thing happens. All the shops and people become a blur, and you go into your own world with the seller.

You say you see a little nick. The seller says this elephant is from Tibet.

What? You both smile… getting close. But then my wife comes over, looks at the calculator, snatches it up and punches in her low price. The seller sighs and… well, you know…we finally end up buying it for a super low price and depart friends.

We find an unusual leather elephant. Notice the golden arches across the street in this picture. Ying had never been to a McDonald's, so I took her there, and she nearly vomited.
Chinese food and eating is nothing like what we do in America. When I eat with my family and friends in China, it is common to place a whole, large fried fish on a plate in the middle of the table and everyone picks at it with their chopsticks. Bones are politely spat out in little piles beside one's plate. Ying enjoys grabbing the fish head with her sticks and sucking out the eyeballs, especially when I'm sitting next to her.
We take a Huangpu River Trip - gliding down between the futuristic Bund and the old embassies and trade houses of the countries which came here long ago. Like before and after, although Shanghai was originally just a muddy fishing camp. Then onto The Shanghai Museum “World's finest showcase of Chinese art and antiquities”: 1,000 Places to See Before You Die. www.shanghaimuseum.net/en/
Sticking to the markets near our hotel in the Bund, we go to Nanjing Road, a huge market with a museum and exciting architecture and springs, buying elephants. We do a lot more including Kezhi Garden and Shanghai Zoo. Depressing how Chinese tourists throw stuff at animals, while the elephants hide. See this travel site for specifics: www.travelchinaguide.com

We meet with some old friends of Ying's and go to the Chinese version of Cracker Barrel, only you order up family style and drink a lot of beer. They call these Tea Rooms-ha. A lot of fun. Bungee! Drink up!

The 400-year-old water village of Zhujiajiao is like a Chinese Venice. This is also home to the amazing five-arch bridge across the Cao Gang River. Take a bus, not expensive taxis, as it is some 50 miles from Shanghai. There's a lot to see (shops, gardens, exhibitions, etc., and do (boat rides and fantastic, inexpensive food).

We go for a ride in a gondola, eat restaurant and street food and walk into the many shops and attractions, like a very old post office, art museums and monasteries. Did you know you still must brush glue on your envelopes and stamps at the post office in China, even now? For the unbelievable real story of how just about everything was invented in China way before the people who claimed they did, read The Man Who Loved China by Simon Winchester. Apparently, though, they must not have invented pre-glued envelopes.
Tracking Panthers In The Fakahatchee Strand

The waves of The Gulf of Mexico are pounding on the beach with phosphorescence just thirty yards away as we sit at a chickee bar betting on crabs. They have numbers on their shells and are in the drink well hopefully heading toward the finish line. But most don't make it, and bet money gets diverted for margaritas and tips. Luckily for our racers, escargot is not on the menu.

My friend, Mac (short for Mary Ann Combs) is built like a Mack truck… a very beautiful truck. Here she is shelling on the beach.

It's 2 AM and the bar is closing, so Mac and I head out in my old Volkswagen bus.

Driving east through the huge subdivision of Golden Gate, it finally peters out into miles of vacant lots and canals. Some 17,000 lots were sold. Now the state is buying them back, tearing up the roads, and filling in the canals. I drive south on Everglades Boulevard, over I-75, where wild, overgrown lots crisscross hundreds of cracked and neglected asphalt roads. There are arrows spray painted on the road, but I know the way well. No street lamps out here, but a full moon is blazing as we head east into The Fakahatchee Strand State Park, over a concrete bridge where a canal bursts water to The Gulf of Mexico, then onto the familiar dirt road.

Mac is snoring in the back bed. I'm driving slow because there's no telling what may be on the road—an alligator, deer, snake or for what I hoped to see: a Florida panther. They are critically endangered with a population estimated less than 100. The Fakahatchee Strand, “The Amazon of North America” is a linear swamp forest about 20 X 5 miles
sculpted by the movement of water for thousands of years. It differs from adjacent Everglades National Park, with wet swamps and prairies of a higher elevation with drier hardwood hammocks and pine rock lands. Several “trams” where cypress logs were carried out in trains now make for dry hiking. It's the only place in the world where groves of native royal palms share forest canopy with bald cypress trees.

Thankfully the full moon and many stars, undimmed by any civilization, light our way along the sand-gravel road which transverses many culverts gushing water. We putt past trails to camps and a small cleared area to park for the tram we came to hike, but I drive on to the Oasis camp where my friend, Gator lives with his wife in a trailer. He is a former poacher turned park ranger and is quite a colorful guy.

With the sun not up we park to sleep. Gator's familiar old head pokes into the van all too soon and we go into his trailer for coffee. I ask him if we can hike to the camp cabin on the east-west tram and if he'd go with us, to which he readily agrees.

Soon all three of us are hiking the tram. The water is high on either side and there are lots of splashing by alligators, fish, and birds. The air is full of the scent of orchids and butterflies dance on the breeze. It is starting to get hot.
Mac stops to cool her feet in the clear swamp water.

A few miles more and we reach the old cabin, which has seen better days.
This mirror I'm in is for looking for bears while in cabin.

It's muddy and damp from recent rains, so we all go off to find wood for a fire with evening approaching. As a glorious sun sets over the Fakahatchee, and before lighting our big pile, Gator starts caterwauling for panther. It's a strange combination he makes blowing into his hands, a thrill whistle. Just when he's about to give up, we hear a scream like a woman. Gator points down the trail. A panther stands on the path about 75 yards off. I'm so excited I can't hold my camera steady, while the elusive puma slanders off.

It’s a large cat—that’s a quarter.

That night Gator tells stories of panthers as we sit around the fire sipping whiskey. That scream is still in my head… the scream of freedom and the wild. The next morning, I photograph its tracks.

For more information about panthers and The Fakahatchee Strand, go to www.floridastateparks.org/park/fakahatchee-strand
Taming Those Darling Tourists

Lying on the road just 15 feet ahead was the biggest, fattest alligator I've ever seen. We are afraid to speak or move—it's scary when there aren't any walls. If this toothy reptile so much as twitches, everyone will shoot back to their cars. But it just dozes there, ignoring the growing crowd.

Normally I drive the wildlife drive of J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge early in the morning or before sunset at low tide when all the wading birds are on the flats. But today I have my neighbor, his 11-year-old daughter and her girlfriend in tow. After watching a film and looking at the exhibits at the visitor's center, we slip our car into the long parade crawling along the five-mile auto tour.

Last year over 600,000 nature lovers drove through this refuge of mangrove forests and fragile wetlands. Totaling 5,030 acres, Ding Darling also includes several other tracts of land, including a beach, comprising nearly half of Sanibel Island just off Florida's southwest coast. Jay Norwood “Ding” Darling, a Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist, helped begin the Federal Duck Stamp Program which has raised funds for this refuge and more than four million acres of land elsewhere.

“Eco-tourism” is what the manager of Ding Darling, Lou Hinds, calls his biggest headache. Lou, who grew up in what is now the Great Swamp NWR in New Jersey and holds a degree in wildlife biology, says if they kick people out of the refuge, the wildlife will benefit, but people will become disgruntled, affecting their conservation and environment voting decisions. The good message, he says, is that a balance is being
The girls are getting restless cooped up in the car, so we stop where volunteer "rovers" have set up telescopes for viewing the birds. Built as a dike to control mosquitoes, the wildlife drive impounds fresh water on one side, mixing with the brackish waters of Pine Island Sound and the Caloosahatchee River on the other side. By controlling the water levels with weirs [dams], biologists interrupt the life cycle of the insects and grow grasses important as feed to migratory birds. In turn, this freshwater system feeds the saltier ecosystem of mangroves, crabs, shrimp, fish, and more birds.
Some 247 species of birds have been recorded around here. As barometers of our environment, some birds, such as the reddish egret, are making a comeback. Others, like the wood stork, are losing ground because of loss of habitat and water.
Little blue heron in Ding Darling.
Further on this dusty drive, we stop at the bird observation tower, then a pier that cuts through the mangroves to a large bay, and finally to a boardwalk that curls through ancient Calusa Indian mounds and highlands.

Some management changes in the refuge include closing the wildlife drive on Fridays, to give the animals a break, and increasing public awareness to minimize spooking of the wildlife.

Photographers, myself included, often try to get too close, upsetting birds enough that they won't come in to feed. But your car is an excellent blind, enabling a closer approach to the many birds hanging out or feeding along the water's edge.
Great blue heron.

Ding Darling is popular because it's so easy to experience nature. That may explain why nearby Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, where legwork is required for a boardwalk loop a little less than two miles long, gets about one-tenth the visitors. We can never set aside enough land for our wildlife and enjoyment, because when one small part is gone, the whole is affected.

This is the other side of the southern end of Sanibel Island and part of Ding Darling. An old lighthouse is nearby and open to the public. I remember when you had to take a ferry boat to get here, and although there are many beach homes, restaurants and stores, Ding Darling NWA composes most of this fabulous island.
Blood Mountain B.C. (Before Cell)

Hiking through ancient, awesome landscapes on the Appalachian Trail (the AT), away from influences of civilization, seems to bring out our true human natures. Without modern electronics, the AT is like a series of human ant hills, each hiker pausing to exchange greetings and information. I wrote this over twenty-five years ago.

Propped up with their backpacks against the handsome stone walls of Walasi-Yi (which means “place of frogs” in Cherokee) Center, a store and a rustic inn for hikers and tourists in the mountains of northern Georgia, two grandfather-aged hikers tell me of their adventures.

They are retired school administrators from Kentucky, and have just hiked the first 45 miles of the AT. Expecting much cooler weather, they had brought far too many heavy clothes they say. Physically and mentally exhausted, it was all worthwhile upon reaching the top of nearby Blood Mountain, they say. There the sweeping vistas and cool, sweet breezes “tremendously” refreshed them and put them in the right frame of mind to go on. They plan to hike nearly 500 miles to Virginia. One of them is icing his foot on the back porch of the center.

When I tell these guys, I'm hiking up to the top of Blood and back today (only about five miles there and back total), they check me out like mother hens. My light-weight running shoes are good, as are my cotton shorts and shirt. Be sure to take drinking water, a quart will do you, and here's an old poncho you can have to stick in your camera bag. You never know what the weather will do in the mountains, they instruct.

Then I tell them my hip is held together with a steel plate and surgical nails, and this will be a feat for me, as well. Now they look at me like I have a plate in my head, and advise me to head out before it gets too hot.

It’s a balmy spring morning, with humid clouds washing around the mountain tops and hills like ocean waves around mossy rocks. From the day-users parking lot, the trail immediately tunnels through jungles of rhododendrons along a bubbling brook. Some steep rock stairs, then the trail is mostly switchbacks sloping upward through crops of rocks.

About halfway a young woman with a large backpack appears on the switchback above me, coming down. I ask her if I can photograph her, and we stop to chat.

She says she just lost her job in Vermont, so decided to hike the entire length of the AT from Georgia to Maine (2100 miles) this summer. Distressed, she says she lost an expensive poncho. I offer her mine, but she needs one that covers her backpack. Maybe she can buy one at the Walasi-Yi store, we think.

An hour later I'm near the top where huge slabs of gray granite streaked with silver mica hang out over 20-30-mile views of pine-covered hills. Mountain laurels are blooming, and a wonderful breeze with their perfume bathes me.

The AT's white trail markers are on the rocks now. Lots of chirping birds. I spot rose-breasted grosbeaks with their bright red chests and parrot-like beaks.
At the very top, the highest peak on the AT in Georgia at 4,458 feet, I reach the wild-looking stone shelter built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Inside I find a journal that says, “write in me” on the cover.

Several entries marvel at how they didn’t want to hike here, but now declared themselves addicted hikers. A scribbled paragraph recounts a sleepless night chasing “polecats”. A 23-year-old man writes excitedly of just asking his girlfriend to marry him…and she said yes.

Then two big guys come strolling into camp. One's a fireman from Orlando, the other a bank examiner from Atlanta. They've been on the trail a week, so want to know the latest news and weather reports.

Knowledgeable hikers never pack things like radios, or even watches, they tell me. When the sun is four fingers above the horizon, it's time to make camp (fast).

Just then an old-looking dude with a pony tail and a banjo strapped to his backpack trudges in. He plays some tunes which seem perfect for the time and place. So much for frugal essentials.

I can't stay to watch the sunset, which must be spectacular. Maybe all that granite takes on the red hues, thus the name, Blood Mountain. But according to Indian legend, it got its name after a fierce battle between Cherokee and Creek Indians. This is what a sign said:”

In Cherokee mythology, the mountains were one of the homes of the Nunnehi or Immortals, the “People Who Live Anywhere”, a race of Spirit People who lived in the great townhouses in the highlands of the old Cherokee Country. One of three mythical townhouses stood near Lake Trahlyta. As a friendly people, they often brought lost hunters and wanderers to their townhouses for rest and care before guiding them back to their homes. Before the coming of the white settlers, the Creeks and the Cherokees fought a disastrous and bloody battle in Slaughter Gap between Slaughter and Blood Mountain.”

The bank examiner runs to catch me as I'm hiking back down. He has found a poncho he thinks might belong to the woman from Vermont, who he had also talked with earlier.

When I reach the center about two hours later, it's raining and dark. I spot the Vermont woman at a pay phone. When I give her the poncho, her face lights up with happiness and relief.
Tanks A Lot

An orange sun is rising from The South China Sea, as we move about on the beach photographing. Suddenly a small tank appears, racing towards us, churning up the brown sand. The Chinese flag is painted on its side. Instinctively I switch to continuous shooting mode and track the tank, thinking it will surely veer off, and go on its way. But it doesn't; it stops next to me. A man in uniform jumps out, grabs my camera and my wife's, then jumps back into the tank, and takes off.

I'm in a communist country, about 100 miles from Vietnam (and a straight shot to the new islands China is building for military bases), and they've taken our cameras. No cell phones or connections. Oh, shit.

Back in our hotel lobby, the manager makes phone calls, and soon a canvas-covered truck pulls up full of soldiers. An officer walks up to me with our cameras. He explains in broken English that it is forbidden to photograph on military outposts.

Immediately I take each camera and erase all the pictures we had taken, as he watches. Everyone's smiling. No problems. I'm sure the same would happen in America, if not worse.
Maybe that explains why there are no tourists.

These islands are about 30 miles east of Zhanjiag, one of the largest sea ports in South China. I had read on the internet there were some fabulous resorts here. But this place is empty except for the hotel and a few restaurants.

One gleaming, colorful hotel was boarded up. No traffic on the streets, just a lone woman sweeping. Obviously, the military drove everyone out. Maybe they still have occasional festivals which keep these people hanging on.
My wife produces a map she has made with our motel manager of all the “beauty spots” around here. Two motorcycles with sidecars drive up. We hop on and head down the island. The wide road quickly becomes a dusty path. Fish farms gleam with mounds of white foam from automatic aerators, which paddle about like little boats. The humid air reeks of fish and chemicals. The beach is within view, and the salty air combination makes it smell like a bad fast food restaurant. We pass through several villages of shacks with children and chickens running around.

Finally, we come to the waterfront. Hundreds of little fishing dories are staked out in a shallow bay for scallop farming. A slight breeze blows a mucky-fishy smell from what must be the South China Sea. A small ferry is docked, and we scurry aboard. It is full of men in work clothes. They say nothing and stare at us. Caucasians seem to be rare around here.

Shortly we arrive at the next island, Naozhao Dao (Dao means island). Hawkers are selling fish, shrimp, sugar cane and xiang jiaos (little bananas) on the pier. We are the only tourists.
Local eating sugar cane, which is common throughout China.

At a grungy cafe overlooking the harbor, we eat fish soup, eggs, and hot cereal…I have learned to let my wife order. Ying says it all cost about $2. On my own, it probably would have cost $10. Last evening, we had charcoaled oysters, stir-fried blue crabs, and greens, and three pints of pi jui (beer, pronounced “pee jew”) for $15 total, including tip. Our clean, but no-frills hotel suite is $45, a bit high, but I think they got a monopoly here. Ying probably could have found a room for $10, but I had plenty of money and prefer rooms where the cockroaches are afraid of me.

Everyone wants a bargain these days. For me, $50 for a luxury hotel and $7 for two steak dinners is a real bargain. For my wife, it is a waste of money. She's lived in poverty all her life, makes $400 a month as a doctor, and collects bottles and eats a lot of rice to get by. I start to appreciate the cheap Chinese meals, love the street food Ying introduces me to, and hope she views my extravagant dinners as an adventure for which one is not just supplying nourishment, but exploring culinary delights, excuse my snobbery. In America, it's like searching the car for change to buy a $1 hamburger, which tastes great when you are very hungry, compared with having surf 'n turf at the river restaurant with a half-price coupon. Does that make cents?

In the four months I lived with Ying in China, I only got food poisoning once. When cooking, or eating raw foods, the standard advice is: “Wash it, boil it, peel it, or forget it.” Furthermore, as Stuart and Barbara Strother say in their *Living Abroad in China* book, “Look for food that is cooked over a flaming fire or a sizzling griddle while you watch, not pre-cooked. Stay away from meat that has been sitting out in the sun or exposed to flies.”

Ying, and her family, will leave cooked food on the table for days until it is eaten. They must have different bacteria in their stomachs.

Some guys next to us are smoking a home-made bong from an old floor wash bucket. I think its pot, (or maybe they found out sugar cane gives you a buzz), but they assure me it's tobacco. It seems most Chinese men smoke, few women…must be a male thing.
Ying hires a tour guide with a motorcycle hooked up to a covered cart for two, and we're off on a very bumpy road up into the mountains. After miles of banana plantations and small villages, we arrive at the top at a hundred-year-old lighthouse built by Frenchmen, but the gates are locked.

We photograph from the walls. A military officer walks towards us, and I say it's time to vamoose, being a little gun shy now. I had filmed it all on a new camera, and I didn't want to lose any. Ying starts arguing with the tour driver that we are getting ripped off, so she takes us to a beach on the side of the mountain. It is crammed with small fishing boats, hungry-looking people, and small fish.
The driver then takes us further down the beach to its end. There is an old, dilapidated monastery, with cacti growing on its roof. Two old men are there. Water is streaming out of the rocks into the sea. Real end-of-the-world feeling.
China can be a great, inexpensive adventure. Just don't photograph moving tanks.
Stoned In Liuzhou

“Ball with music and drinking makes you drunken, which you've never enjoyed” read the room guide in The Liuzhou Hotel. My kind of hotel, I think— I can get drunk and won't have to speak coherently.

My wife and I come here because it is where Ying grew up, and her mother, brothers and their families live here. It is a large (about the size of Austin), old city North of Nanning, tucked into old karst mountains. Every visit we give a lavish dinner, rent a large, private room at a hotel complete with sofas, TV, and very attentive waitresses and busboys. The meal consists of 8 to 10 courses plus fruit, deserts, beer, and wine. It's all brought in large bowls and platters and placed on a large revolving turn table. Last time we only had eight family members and it cost 1200 RMB-about $170. And there's a lot of food and wine leftover for the family to take home.

I think this tradition, which I'm told is widespread, is that rich, new family should share with poor new family. I really don't mind and enjoy it. I'm far from rich, but compared to most Chinese people I am. My family in China is very poor. I'm not sure how many people live in their tiny, dirty apartment in Liuzhou, but there are 6 people in and out, and someone's usually sleeping in their van.

I learn another tradition when we get married: I pay for the reception. We rent 3 reception rooms at the luxury hotel I had been staying, and wined and dined over 100 people. Cost: $650. How could I complain? Ying and I stand outside the hotel entrance dressed in Chinese wedding garb. When guests approach, I offer and light a cigarette for the man, and Ying accepts gifts, which is always Chinese cash. I don't know how much money we make, but Ying is a very happy camper for days.

But isn't the brides' family paying for everything in America just a throw-back to the old days of dowries? If I had it my way, I'd pay for hamburgers and hotdogs grilled at the beach, with beer and special cigarettes offered to both sexes.

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“But this art was not always silent. Long time ago there was a popular song—'a wonder stone can sing'. So, if you want to experience such wonderful feeling, please come to Liuzhou.”
The Sky tram takes you up to the tallest mountain in Liuzhou, Jian pan Mountain. The park below has a special stone garden, and a display of over 1,000 pieces of fantastic special stones.

Most Chinese cities are heavily polluted. A woman I met in Liuzhou came to visit me in my cabin in The Blue Ridge Mountains and photographed the clouds all day. She said they don't have pretty clouds in Liuzhou. Then she had to go to Atlanta for school, where she will feel right at home with the air (Atlanta, like Beijing, has days when they say don’t breathe :-)).

Ying's brother takes us out into the country. We stop in the rice fields, and watch them collect and thrash. I point to the unhusked, brown rice and tell Ying that is what she should eat: brown rice, not white. She says white rice is a tradition, and they often eat a bowl at the end of a meal to fill up. I remember my father and grandfather eating white bread with gravy poured on it at the end of dinner.
We go caving under old karst mountains, winding through the tunnels carved by water. Afterwards, we go to an old farm, eat chicken, and drink Chinese vodka (ugh).

A lot of China looks like America. The pine-covered hills with waterfalls south of Luizhou look much like The Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia. The spot below looks like it could be in southern Texas.
Newly-built bridge over a river near where we ate with farmers in the country.
How To Be A Monkey In China

I meet Ying on a Chinese dating internet site. She posted a picture of a beautiful, youthful lady with long black hair and slim body. And she was a doctor! Although many younger Chinese women answer my ad I posted with this Chinese site, I thought a woman closer to my age (Ying said she was 46), would be best, so we started e-mailing and even calling each other. Her English was bad, but she was studying hard to learn.

This went on for many months. We wrote about everything, our dreams, and opinions about everything. Little did I know, someone else was writing the love letters, and Ying was about twenty years older than her photo and a bit chubby. But I believed the love letters basically came from her, and said I'd come to see her in Nanning, and if the sparks flew, I'd marry her.

My nightmare begins when I land in Canton and ask the information desk where my hotel is located. They send me downtown to the wrong hotel (mine was 60 miles away, thanks to Expedia). I leave my laptop on the bus, then find myself surrounded by street people in the middle of the night. I get them to understand I left my laptop on the bus, they summon a taxi, and we chase the bus down. A nice man was holding it, marveling at his find.

Back to that hotel with about three new friends, they book me in for at least twice the going rate, and then I tip them all well and said goodbye. At my room, a young girl in a tight short dress and the longest legs, follows me in saying “Do you like?” I am hysterically tired from the 22- hour flight and the laptop chase, and make the mistake of letting her close the door.

She wants to take a shower. I let her. She comes out in just in a towel. I come to my senses, order her to dress and shoo her out.

I can't sleep on the hard bamboo bed. Trying the sofa, a booming knock comes on my door. It's the girl's pimp demanding 50 yuan. I argue, threaten calling the police, but it's no use. I give him the money.

The next morning early and with little sleep, I check in my luggage and leave my e-ticket in the bags. I had a receipt but China Southern will not acknowledge my paperwork with “confirmed reservation”, and I am forced to buy another costly ticket to Nanning.

The tiny China Southern jet flies me across China to Nanning. I run up to the wrong Chinese woman at the gate. I have that 20- year-old photo of Ying in my head, and didn't recognize the real one. Ying grabs me and hugs me and takes me to a car with three men. One of the men tells me we are going to a nice Chinese restaurant and it was tradition I pay. This is the first of many traditions.
Ying runs a small clinic here for a large state-run survey company. She takes care of her “big, strong Chinese boys” working up in the mountains, then drips glucose into their grandmothers.

I soon realize Ying doesn't know much English at all, and we drag around an interpreter, “Teacher”, an agreeable Mongolian, a lot. Ying wants to know if I want children (no), do I have a lot of money (kind of, at present), and other direct questions. No sex until we get married, Teacher informs me. Ying sleeps with me the second night at my hotel, and my fate is sealed. She begins making plans for a big wedding.
I can barely stand my wife's apartment. I have an American toilet, a washing machine (Ying did it by hand), all new windows (overlooking six apartment buildings going up), and a wall heat and air system installed. The building noise and dust are 24/7.

Some young men come and “test” my laptop. My home web sites are blocked. I watch government propaganda on CCTV: “See China change. See you change.” I was changing all right. I now couldn't monitor my cabin rental business. Not long ago, Google stood up to the Chinese government for blocking many web sites. I wonder if mine had just been blocked by hand.

Well, how much of our government is monitoring our internet? We worry about the day when we could be monitored and tracked anywhere, but we already have that: cell phones.

Luckily the markets of Nanning capture me and my camera. The colors, people and unusual stuff are overwhelming.
My wife keeps me entertained with Chinese Operas (she gets free tickets), trips to parks and other markets, and elaborate dinners with her friends and family. We take trips to other places on the weekends.
Nanning park where you glide over the lily pond.

I buy us two new bicycles for $50. We have no car; Ying bikes less than a mile to her clinic, and I enjoy bicycling about town and to the markets. My Chinese is improving—I can barter a little now.
Chicken feet are always eaten. They are all fat.

I'm staying here for three months this time, and start going to the “English Corners” — restaurants where Americans, and Australians meet. I make several friends, and meet them at outdoor cafes for wine and cheese. They give me great insights into Chinese culture. One Aussie teaches English here and told me that all Chinese women lie. Another told me to never buy pot, as they will hang you. Meanwhile, he rolls one while we are sitting at an outdoor cafe. Later, I go to the Australian's teaching center, and get interviewed by his drunk Chinese secretary. I figure associations with my new friends may be detrimental to my health and end them.
I bike to my wife's clinic every weekday, and we go out to a new restaurant for large lunches. Then we go back to the apartment and nap. Ying goes back to work for two hours. She doesn't work hard, except when they send her out into the mountains to attend to survey crews. At night, we go to friends or relatives, or hop in a taxi to a fancy restaurant. It's so darn cheap—at least half of what you'd pay in the states. And taxi fares diminish thoughts of buying an expensive car.
At this market, we are invited to have tea. Americans are rare and they are politely curious about me.

My favorite restaurant was one we found by accident looking for another. It was Beijing style; the food is placed in a canal of hot oil which circles around on top of your table, and you grab whatever you want with your chopsticks as it floats by (a waiter keeps adding meat and vegetables).

Ying's favorite was Chairman's Mao Restaurant. It was very fancy old Chinese, and wonderful. They still think Mao was a great man. They also believe the Bushes were murderers. I think it's all how you see things, and there's always propaganda. Ying never heard of the killings at Tiananmen Square, more horrific than our Kent State.

We eat breakfast downstairs at the hotel I stayed when I first came here, mostly working people filled to the brink. You circle several walls of food and food stations encased in glass, choosing what you want and take a ticket, then they bring them to you in little bamboo food containers (dinsune). I couldn't tell you what many of the things we ate, but it was all delicious, and super cheap.

Traditional Chinese food consists mostly of rice and other grains, starchy vegetables, bean dishes, and noodles. Meat is usually used as a condiment. Diabetes and heart diseases and some cancers have been rare here until McDonalds, Pizza Hut and all the others came.

[author’s notes: In America, it takes 6.7 pounds of grains and forage, 52.8 gallons of water, 74.5 square feet for grazing and growing feed crops, and 1,036 btus for feed production and transportation to make a quarter-pound hamburger.]
Every year the average American swallows 200 pounds of meat, 33 pounds of cheese and nearly 60 pounds of added fats and oils.

The latest research now says eating vegan can reverse diabetes and heart disease. I am thrilled to learn this because I have developed both. The thought of not killing animals also thrills me. In America, we “process (that is, grow and kill) nearly 10 billion animals a year, more than 15% of the world’s total. Please read Dr. Neal Barnard’s Program for Reversing Diabetes: The Scientifically Proven System for Reversing Diabetes Without Drugs.

According to the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization, livestock production generates nearly a fifth of the world’s greenhouse gases—more than transportation.

In a world where half of the population is starving and/or malnourished, most corn and soy grain in the world feeds cattle, pigs, and chickens. Eat less meat and feed and clean the world. Get healthy and happy. Meanwhile my ex-wife and friends can eat all the bugs they want, minus fish eyes. They are probably eating undiscovered beneficial nutrients.]
Looped On The Li

Taking the train back up the other coast from Sanyo (see next chapter), the landscape goes from mangroves to fancy-looking resorts and retirement places, to jungles of vegetable and fruit farms. Flying out of Haikou to Guilin, we check into another fancy hotel for $50, and meet up with friends of Ying's. That evening we took a boat tour to see all the light decorations, then watch fishermen using cormorants to catch fish.

The friends drive us down to a little town on the Li River, where we go to a restaurant. They just say, “Beer Fish” (they didn't speak English either). All the fish is cooked in beer and served with buckets of pi jui. I had plenty of both.
At the boat docks, my new friends rent a big river boat and pilot just for the four of us. And it's a good thing, as I was sloshing all over amidships, as we rushed down a choppy, fast-moving river. With the karst mountains rushing by, I felt like I was riding a dragon inside out.
We pull up to big stairs leading up to buildings carved out of the soft limestone. Many vendors and interesting doors and carved-out porches beckon for closer inspection.

Obviously, these mountains were lived in and still are. Back in the boat, Ying and the others are eating grilled scorpions and crabs, so I sit up front on a deck and watch the
river and mountains flow by. This has been an interesting adventure. The Li River is in south-central China, just south of Guilin and northeast of Nanning. Although millions of people go down it each year, we rent a large boat to ourselves with a pilot of course, and avoid the crowds. Lucky us. It’s like having a private boat going down The Rio Grande in The Grand Canyon.
**Doctor Fish Suck**

The little suckers are feasting on my wife. Ying, who is a traditional Chinese doctor, is amused. Hundreds of “doctor fish” (gar-rufa) are eating her dead skin, as she soaks in the warm spring water. Imported from Turkey, these inch-long minnows don't have teeth, just a suction cup mouth.

Honeymooning at the fabulous Crown Spa Resort on Hainan Island, there is a huge pool with a wet bar, covered hot springs and water volleyball overlooking a beach of the South China Sea. Every evening a lavish Asian bar-b-Que is spread out at the beach. Every morning an extensive Chinese breakfast buffet beckons us from a stately room with a South China Sea view.

This all sounds expensive, but everything is very cheap. Think 1960's prices in the U.S.
We find the elephants again at this fabulous resort. Rumor has it a herd of wild elephants nearby had big bells attached around their necks to warn people. The crafty elephants packed the bells with mud and stole all the bananas everywhere.

We hire a local fisherman to take us out fishing in his little boat. He hands us beer cans with fishing line wrapped around them, I dangled the tiny hook with a worm in a fast long-shore current for hours to no avail. The only thing I was catching was a bad sunburn.

Then he motors us to markers where he pulls up long nets of cages full of large shrimp, blue crabs, and little fish and squids. He gives us over a hundred pounds. I pay $35 for everything.
When we arrive back at the dock, some local women meet us and offer to cook them for us. They invite us to join their wedding party in progress. We sit in a little mud hut and eat roast pig, and all kinds of dishes I didn't know, cold bottles of pi jui and some of our catch.

Later, I get sick. I notice the river where the village was on (The Henggou River) had open latrines dumping into the water. Duh.

We hire a car with driver to take us to Sanyo, down on the southern end of this large (240 km X 220 km) island to its second largest city. We had been up north in the capitol of Hainan Province, Haikou. The island is also known as Coconut Island. Its tropical monsoon maritime climate produces many coconuts, plus coffee, cashews, fruits, vegetables and over 2,000 medicinal plants. It has little mountains, hot springs, mangrove forests, coral reefs, and some of the cleanest air in China. There is high-speed train rail, but we wanted to stop along the way, see the beautiful beaches and gardens.

Sanya has become a popular tourist destination, with hundreds of hotels. Nature reserves of Yalong Bay Tropical Paradise Forest and, Sanya Coral Reef National Nature Reserve are located on nearby Yalong Bay.

In recent years, the waters of Sanya Bay and others are becoming clearer and healthier, and the endangered Chinese white dolphins appear to be making a comeback.
However, it's over-commercialized and touristy compared to Weizhou, and even with Ying I get taken a bit with overpriced hotel rates and diving outfitters, who charge too much to outfit you, ban underwater cameras and take as much money from you as possible. Bring your own snorkel equipment and dive the reefs right off from your hotel for free. Take the train. Read current travel guides. Everything is negotiable. But Scotty can’t beam you up here—have backup plans, an electronic translator, or a Chinese friend. Find a pen pal. Join a Chinese dating site, as there are a million beautiful young Chinese women looking for a rich American, but a lot of deception goes on. The government even publishes a booklet on how to get an American. Now, it is Chinese law all children must visit their parents in China once a year. Marry a Chinese woman, and you'll be spending a lot more of that “traditional” money.

“When traveling, don't forget to take swimming suit and sunglass, anti-tanned hat, and when bathing and sunbathing, you'd better to apply your face with the anti-tanned oil, don't expose to the sun for a long time in order to avoid impairing your skin,” says my map of Hainan.
Booming Beihai

Train travel is cheap in China and goes everywhere. There is coach, sleepers, and of course the high-speed train in Shanghai. Now there are high-speed railroads on both sides of Hainan Island and elsewhere. We took a coach from Nanning to Beihai, about 80 miles south to the coast. Tooted the fastest growing coastal town in China, Beihai has beautiful beaches and mangrove preserves. Think southern Florida 40 years ago.

The beach outside our hotel offers a bit of everything. We rent the ponies for a few dollars and splash through the waves.

We stay at the beautiful Shanghai-La, take a boat ride at Silver Sands Beach, visit a marine aquarium and eat some fabulous fish dinners for about a third of what it costs in Key West. We make three trips to Beihai, taking the ferry to Weizhou Island twice and the big ferry to Hainan Island on our honeymoon.

Ying is always complaining I spend too much on hotels and food, so I let her do some of the booking, which results in us staying in some run-down Chinese hotels and apartments, taking the cheapest ferries, and eating in some hot, cheap restaurants. But I never would have experienced the real China without her. Of course, she spoke the language and all I can say is hello, how much, thank you and I love you. Usually I was the only American, and that seemed to make everyone smile for some reason (big, fat, rich American caught by smart Chinese woman).
Beihai is inexpensive and worth exploring before taking the ferries to Weizhou and Hainan Islands. Many expats are making it their home. For an excellent guide, go to www.wikitravel.org/en/beihai
Lost In China

I fly into Shanghai, then to the coastal city of Zhuhai, the “Chinese Riviera” known as a great place for English teachers with affordable housing, beautiful beaches, and relatively high-paying teacher jobs. Staying in a cheap hotel the first few weeks I stroll the outdoor markets of everything imaginable, take several pretty girls to lunch who just want to learn English, and send off hundreds of applications for teacher positions, letting them know I was here and available. I don't have the know with all to approach schools personally with resume in hand so I continue with e-mail submissions and move to a hostel to cut down on expenses. Just a few blocks from the port to Hong Kong and Shenzhen, (another port went to Macau, “China's Las Vegas”).

This hostel is two stories of an old condominium with an open living room, the usual male, female and co-ed bunk rooms, and a large desk where two young Chinese run the place and sleep. I couldn't figure out if they were males or females, both with short hair, huge glasses, and baggy clothes (turned out they were both female), but they prepare wonderfully delicious lunches and dinners for cheap and I can order pints of beer for the equivalent of one dollar. I work on applications in my room, the small men’s bunk room which is usually empty, walking around the docks and shopping for groceries, as we have a nice kitchen to cook in.

One day a little American rammed his way into the hostel with his bike. He came to do his laundry. I go up on the roof where we hang laundry to dry to talk with him. There's a fantastic view of the port and The South China Sea up there. He's 60 years old and has been teaching kindergarten for 6 years. He's just a little guy, but muscled from bike riding (all over Asia he says). “Nothing to it,” he explains jumping around. “We sing some songs, play some games, then it's nap time.”

Of course, there's more to it, and I don't think I can handle little kids, but he is full of advice for getting a teaching position. Later he takes me to an American bar with wonderful home-brewed beers and organic beef cheeseburgers to die for. This is a hangout for teachers and the owner, a big man from Chicago, keeps taking teachers in the back with them coming back with big smiles and a sweet smoky odor. He also brews a sweet beer named “Mary Jane”. There is live entertainment into the wee hours, and I take a cab back to the hostel as the bus has stopped and my new friend is on a bike.

It's spring break in China and the whole country is moving around. I meet several beautiful young Chinese women who want nothing more than to talk English with me. A stunningly beautiful American woman took off with me to a large fish market, where we buy a huge lobster and have it cooked in a crowded Chinese restaurant there. She speaks Chinese and I realize the big advantage, as with all the traveling I did with my Chinese wife here in China.

I get an e-mail from Elaine back in Georgia with a phone number for a “sister” at a local Seventh Day Adventist Church. I call and finally get someone who could understand English, and she gives me their address. Next Saturday (Sabbath day) I go to an old but ornament apartment complex with a guard. A young Chinese woman comes out and takes
me into their church. It is a place a lot like the hostel…big kitchen, tall open room with chairs, organ and crosses, and a bunk room.

The Chinese women at the church fix me a feast after late sermon. Only one woman spoke English there and she translated the sermon and talking for me.

These Chinese are wonderful people and I begin attending church there. One day after early service a Chinese English teacher, Eddie, comes from Shenzhen. He gets me to move into the bunk room of the church, so then I have the whole place to just me and God during the week. I often walk to a large market nearby and buy a slab of tofu for about a dollar and some greens which I cook in a giant wok. I stay there for several weeks, but then go to Hong Kong to renew my tourist visa.
I take the ferry to Tsim Sha Tsui, which is in Kowloon. I book a cheap hostel bunk there, as hotel rooms cost half a month's teacher's salary. Then a ferry ride to Central Hong Kong and a rather long walk for me with my bad hip to the foreign embassy. The renewal takes two days, so it was back to Tsim Sha Tsui and the hostel. I walk about with the crowds and live on food from the 7-11. Lots of street people and prostitutes at night so I talk with my bunk mates, who are all teachers in limbo, just like me, except for this one young Chinese guy who was running a business out of there on his laptop.

Eddie e-mails me there is a teaching position open where he teaches in Shenzhen and, although it was teaching math, it was fifth grade and he was sure I could handle it. I take a bus up through The New Territories and across the river to Shenzhen where Eddie takes me on bike taxi to his place—a multi-share room dorm where I sleep in the common room on a sofa. This is a crowded place high up in a condominium with four young, Chinese women running around and making much noise all the time, a greasy kitchen full of cockroaches, and me feeling I'm encroaching on them. Three other rooms are Eddie's, and two young Chinese men who work in high tech industries.

I take a subway to the school, they call it an international college, but it's a private 1-12 grade school where half the kids live, the others driven by wealthy parents.

The position they offer me, teaching only 16 hours a week to 8 classes pays so much I am too stunned not to sign—16,000 RMB per month plus 3500 RMB housing, free breakfast and lunch and paid vacations. That's like $60,000 in America.
This is the school. Those are the five flights of stairs I trudged to teach eight different classes.

I've never taught school, and although they had study guides, I am terrified. I e-mail my sister who is head of the high school art department in Naples, Florida. She says to go on
the internet and I will find all kinds of aids and games.

I spend two classes with the teacher leaving and he lets the kids run around screaming and shows them funny videos. I didn't realize this was his going-away fun, so I thought this should be easy. On my own I start with the students standing up one at a time to say their American name they have all adopted—Mary, Star, John, Charles, etc. and I photograph them so I can associate and remember over 200 of them.
I give lessons on the chalk board and some power point presentations, but soon learn I must keep their attention, or they all go off talking and yelling and me yelling at them. These kids all come from well-to-do families, many are very spoiled, some neglected, and just put in here. Most of the girls are little angels, while the boys are intellectual or little monsters.

We have the most fun when I have them make math things like prisms out of cardboard or I take them to computer lab where I let them play specific fun games I found involving math.

I fall in love with these kids. They are at that perfect age where everything should be fun and new without troubles.

When they tell me they love me, I think maybe this is like the wonders of having kids. They know the math better than me. I am just there to teach them the English of math.

I rent a studio apartment within walking distance of the school.

It overlooks a fruit market and an old road that goes on for miles, again selling everything imaginable. I buy kitchen stuff, a wok, tennis shoes and a cane. My hip is getting worse but I don't use the cane at school even though I must go up and down five flights of stairs all day, as my classes are all in their home rooms.

I must go to Hong Kong every month to renew my tourist visa. I'm working illegally as a teacher is supposed to get a work visa back in his own country, but they tell me I can do that during summer break.

Back in Shenzhen I start falling over for no reason, so I go to a Chinese hospital where they proceed to put hundreds of needles in me and turn them about (acupuncture). It hurts like hell and does no good.

I don't go many places like some of the teachers. Shenzhen is a huge sprawling green place, actually a bunch of little old fishing villages they filled in the swamps and built all new buildings and offices and factories: Google, Intel, etc. Now they are tearing down the old villages but the old people can't afford the new condos, so old condos become high rise slums.

I do go out with some of the male teachers who proceed to put me under the table with their beer drinking. These guys do this every day and are hugely obese, but with Chinese wives trying to stop them.

All too soon the semester ends. I hang out for another month, as I am still getting paid, and I have a set return flight. The plan is to go home (Atlanta) and get my work visa and return, but my wife writes and tells me to come to Austin, Texas. As I understand it, she wants us to open our own massage parlor and says the money will be terrific. I wish she spoke better English. Read on to see the mess I get into in Texas.
Awesome Austin

Flying into Austin, I’m exhausted from the 26-hour flight. When I get up from my seat to get off, my hip refuses to function properly, and I slam into the seat across the aisle and drop to the narrow floor.

“Are you o.k.?” a captain flying coach behind me asks.

“No,” I reply.

They help me into a wheelchair and are more than happy to get rid of me in a taxi.

“My wife’s a doctor,” I tell them, “she’ll take care of me.”

At Ying’s “Lucky Spa”, the pretty Chinese women coo over me, then take me to Ying’s apartment nearby.

The pain in my thigh is incredible and I can barely walk with my cane leaning on Ying. She tries everything in her traditional doctor arsenal, including acupuncture and scalding me with grape leaves in boiling water.

I have x-rays taken by a sports doctor who tells me I tore a ligament which should heal.

Ying gives me money to buy a car, I get my Texas driver’s license, and she is happy I can drive her to her massage parlor and shopping. I try to teach her to drive, but she is terrified. Austin is a crazy place to drive.

I spend most of my free time out at the pool where I meet a guy who tells me what goes on at Ying’s parlor. It’s horrific to me. Searching the backpages.com of the internet I read it is one of several “happy ending” parlors.

Ying is going to China for plastic surgery on her face and eyes. Now I understand how she has so much money. No regular massage therapist makes that kind of money. I take her to the airport, go back to the apartment, pack, and leave.

I buy some good camping equipment and head out to the Hill Country to think and meditate. Three weeks camping in some wonderful state parks, I head back to Austin to confront Ying and perhaps remedy the situation.

But she has moved out. When I call her, she refuses to talk and hands her cell to her co-worker who just yells at me for stealing the car (which is titled to me). She claims they are legitimation massage therapists.

This goes on for weeks. I ask for a divorce, and plan to go to South Florida to see my family for Christmas. My old car thinks not and blows up. I am forced to sell it for scrap.

Running low on cash, staying in a cheap motel, I take a bus to hawk some of my electronics. It’s wet, and cold. Getting off the bus I slip and fall, breaking my knee on the pavement.

After two weeks in a hospital, they farm me out to a homeless charity agency, as they can’t fix my knee, and they can’t let me out on my own. The agency places me in a nursing home. There’s a lot of screaming and people sitting around staring, but I’m lucky
to get in a room the agency (Front Steps) pays for. They have good physical therapy for me. I stay for four months, am diagnosed by an orthopedic doctor with a ruptured quadriceps which can only be treated by strengthening the muscles around it.

I learn Austin is my kind of city, as the social worker assigned to me drives me wherever I ask. I read the first thing Graham Nash (of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young fame) did when he got here was to go see “The First Photograph”, at The Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas At Austin. We go see it. It’s a little disappointing. Here is the link to see it for yourself: [www.hrc.utexas.edu](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu) but you must realize this photo was made by using a *camera obscura* and pewter plates coated with a type of asphalt.

Austin is riddled with caves and, unbeknownst to most, where wine and art shows were invented by cavemen. Using the same principle as the *camera obscura*, they painted images thrown up on their cave walls by small cave openings. Painting with berry juice and charcoal, they drank the fermented berry juice, got inspired and invited their friends over. This was the beginning of Austin’s weirdness.

Only after moving to a halfway house, am I finally diagnosed with osteopenia of the hip. All my cartilage between my hip and femur has been worn away and that is why I’ve been falling. I’m scheduled for a total hip replacement.
One of the street people I live with at a halfway house.

Fortunately, I get accepted at a government-subsidized apartment complex, where I get a furnished handicapped-enabled studio right before my surgery.
Next door a car wash swishes and blows like a steam boat, complete with bells and people yelling on speakers. This is the view from my window. It’s been an inspiration for me. Miracles do happen.

I learn three months after the fact, Ying has divorced me. This explains why she writes e-
mails saying we are just friends now. I’m all for that. I call her and she says she has no 
money, so I take what little I have for her and meet her for lunch on my birthday. She 
tries to pay my $50 taxi fare, and has gifts, money and a birthday cake waiting at our 
table.

I can rationalize our relationship several ways, i.e. forgiveness, karma, God, but let me 
give you what I know: you only need three things to be happy—someone to love, work 
you love doing, and something to look forward to. Tom Bodett and later, Kenny Rodgers 
subscribed to this theory.

According to an article in The Huffington Post by Joe Robinson we have “The 3 Core 
Need”. Called the self-determination theory, we have three psychological needs: 
autonomy(independence), competence, and relatedness (the need for social connection 
and intimacy).

I’ve been having a lot of trouble with the latter. Here in Austin is Austin Kleon, 
bestselling writer-artist of *Show Your Work*. He advocates nothing beats having your own 
domain, “a place that no one can take away from you, a world headquarters where people 
can always find you.” [www.austinkleon.com](http://www.austinkleon.com)

A year has gone by. I have been working on this book, updating the stories, and adding 
new material, while rehabbing my leg. I can walk some without a cane now. I’ve turned 
vegan, and have lost a lot of weight and feel wonderful. If everyone ate a plant-based 
diet, we could end world hunger, and greatly reduce world warming.

Now I’m working on a screenplay tentatively entitled *Rub Me*. It’s about a naïve 
American teaching in China who marries a deceptive Chinese doctor and risks his life to 
save her from the Chinese mafia in the massage business in Austin.

I call Ying up before her birthday and ask her out for dinner. She says yes and that she is 
lying back to China two days later. I offer to take her to the airport and she can spend the 
three days with me, as she is moving out of her apartment and will be gone two months.

We have a really good time. I take her to Lady Bird Lake and sit out in the sun. She’s 
never seen anything in Austin because she works six days a week, twelve hours a day. 
Maybe she is a legitimate massage therapist.
Ying takes this picture with the latest iPhone at Green Gardens.

Austin is a mecca island of artists, innovators and uniqueness anchored in a sea of old republican Texas. SXSW, Austin City Limits, The University of Texas, amazing
restaurants, and museums, bring visitors from all over.

It is the Live Music Capital of the world, one of the top cities in the nation for craft brewing and is tooted the next great food town. Situated on the Colorado River and Lady Bird Lake, it is growing so fast many artists can’t afford to live here. Thousands of homeless people hang out downtown becoming a problem to tourists while loud music keeps people awake in swanky hotels.

Austin is a weird place, but everyone wants to keep it that way. The largest colony of bats in a U.S. city roost under a bridge over Lady Bird Lake. Thousands of people come to see thousands of bats from the bridge and tour boats. An expensive apartment high rise apartment is going up which is prohibiting cars.

Come see this place to believe it. Like China’s “See China change. See you change.” Come see Austin grow. Come grow with Austin. You need a vacation anyway

It’s Austin, so I shouldn’t be shocked, but all my wife’s friends were busted for money laundering and running a prostitution businesses. They found all the drains clogged up with condoms. Google it.

I told Ying to stay in China, but she is back. Chinese women?.

Downtown Austin. Check out the huge metal bat on the right.
About The Author

Bruce Slaugenhaupt graduated from Ohio State University with a B.A. in English and photography. He worked for Gulfshore Life and Florida Living magazines and several newspapers, and contributed to Adventure Travel, Florida Wildlife, Volkswagen, Mother Earth News, and numerous newspapers.

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