

The Devniad, Book 24

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Far and Away.

Winter lingers yet, and a deep and restless longing to explore places far away and quench my relentless wanderlust in thrilling adventures under exotic skies agitates my savage breast.

So I read travel books until the urge recedes. And share with you herein some favorite little stories concerning trips other people have taken.

Actually, one recent reading is not a book but a cool e-mail — a little travel note from my old high school friend David Rice, which I've titled, paragraphed, reformatted, and generally screwed around with because it's *my* zine.

David lives in Missouri with his wife, the lovely and talented Nurse Pat. But occasionally his work for a multinational sends him farther afield ...

To the Finland Sauna by David Rice

Well I made my first visit to Finland and I did it in February. I visited a company in Vaasa, 200 miles north of Helsinki.

There is very little daylight and it snows constantly. Everyone rides a bike to work even in the winter. They have studs on their tires. Everyone also has a cellular phone, you don't want to have to ride your bike to the store twice.

The hotel has a sauna, an electric sauna. Every home and apartment comes equipped with a sauna. My hosts own a lodge on the Baltic Sea that has a smoke sauna.

A smoke sauna takes 6 hours to prepare. We show up at 7:00 p.m. to the lodge and began drinking beer. Then strip down and take a shower.

Then my host, a president of a large company, says, "Now we go outside for a short walk."

It's 10 degrees and butt naked we run through the snowy woods for 50 yards. We enter a small wooden building which is the smoke sauna.

We sit in 180 degree smoke and chat.

We have branches which we dip in a pail and hit ourselves and each other to stimulate the circulation.

I feel like I'm burning up.

I listen to old Viking stories on the reason saunas were used to resolve conflict (if you are naked, you cannot hide a knife).

I'm now on fire.

My host says, "You don't have to overdo your stay."

I burst out of the sauna and we begin to trot 100 yards through the snow toward the Baltic Sea. With steam coming off our bodies in the 10 degree night, we look like Martians.

We get to the dock, the sea has frozen over. Someone has chipped a 20 yard hole in the ice.

I jump in.

The water is 39 degrees.

I climb out.

In a few seconds I feel fine. Quite comfortable, we casually walk back to the smoke sauna.

We do it all again.

Then it's back to the lodge where they drink and drink and drink ...

For food I had a reindeer steak which was very good. For lunch in the company cafeteria I had reindeer meatloaf (minced meats). They serve beer at lunch at the company cafeteria.

Finns say 8 million people on earth live above the Arctic Circle, and 4 million of them are Finns.

Inca Yarns

OK, you're back in North Attleboro with Bob Devney again.

That David has always been the questing, adventurous type. He once tried to include me in a vacation trip to South America. I acquiesced to the extent of buying a travel book on the Andes.

If you're still chilly from that dip in Finland (not you, Dave), let's warm up with some hot anecdotes from the book.

Lynn Meisch's *A Traveler's Guide to El Dorado and the Incan Empire* (revised Penguin edition 1984) is one of the most entertaining tomes I own.

For instance, it's apparently not such a great idea to try to *drive* straight through to South America from here. Or if you do, be sure to have your car shipped around an area in Panama called the Darien Gap, which makes the Bermuda Triangle seems cozy. Panama is outside the area covered by Ms. Meisch's book, but she nevertheless can't pass up this quote from a writer named Ernest Jahn, and neither can I:

"In 1972, a team of 33 British scientists and soldiers crossed the Darien which took them 99 days. They had to haul their two trucks by rope when the going was too rough, and had to raft them across rivers. At some points they had to hack their way tree-by-tree through some of the most treacherous territory on earth. The savage jungle has thousands of poisonous snakes lurking in foul

swamps, enormous black ants whose sting could numb a man all day, and tarantulas the size of a dinner plate. The \$260,000 expedition was supplied by airdrops with food and gasoline. The team lost 5 men who were sucked to their death in an oozing mud swamp."

[You think that's bad, you should try walking down Newbury Street in Boston with my wife Maureen on an August day when it's too hot and she gets cranky.]

I should say that Meisch's book amply demonstrates her high regard for South America, especially the Indian peoples of the high Andes, and is full of lovingly assembled information on topics such as crafts and textiles, Inca yarn, the origins of corn and potatoes, archaeological sites, and fascinating local culture. However, knowing my audience, I'll just pick out a few extra-tasty bits for maximum shallow, empty entertainment calories.

"I often think our American habit of rushing around is a way to avoid reflection, and to South Americans we must appear incredibly hyperactive ... A bus driver may ask himself what's really more important, sticking to a precise schedule or spending a little more time at his daughter's birthday party. Everyone sitting at the side of the road knows the bus will come sooner or later, so what's the rush?"

[I've tried this on my boss when I get in late. No luck so far.]

"Travelers should be cognizant of a Bolivian custom known as *viernes de soltero*, which means 'Friday single' or 'Friday unmarried.' The white or *cholo* (town Indian) men, married or not, are 'single' on Friday night; they go out to drink, carouse and visit whorehouses

while their wives stay home and mind the children. Women are not welcome in bars and cantinas on Friday nights unless they're whores. It's a good night for a woman traveler to eat in a nice restaurant, go to a movie or stay in her hotel and write letters."

[Or maybe try organizing that Cochabamba NOW chapter *pronto*.]

"In more remote areas, the toilet is the pig sty. (This has done nothing to increase my appetite for pork.) By the time you're this far into the countryside you'll have learned to keep your pocket stuffed with toilet paper. Another hint — before you go to the sty, pick up a handful of pebbles to throw at the pigs so you can do your business in safety."

[And this passage has done nothing to increase *my* appetite for South American travel.]

"I never see movies at home anymore — they're too expensive. Instead, I catch them in South America, where they cost between twenty-five and fifty cents."

"Hotels in the Andes have come up with amazing devices to provide hot water for guests. A common solution is to connect two electrical wires to the shower pipe. The current is activated by throwing a huge switch, the kind you see in old gangster movies when someone dies in the electric chair. Every time I use one of these electric showers I have the distinct feeling I'm throwing the switch at my own execution, and this isn't wide of the mark ... I've gotten some whopperoo shocks."

I've been frantically paging through Meisch looking for a final capper quote I remember as hers, but can't find anywhere. So I'll wing it, so to speak.

When traveling in certain low-lying South American areas, this passage said, ALWAYS wear at least a thin blanket over you in bed. No matter how hot the night becomes, how sweltering your room, never remove that blanket — taking particular care at all times to completely cover your feet.

It seems there's this toe-sucking vampire bat

Can't resist more travel-related bits? OK, just a few:

It is said that one of the first travel guides, issued in the 1700s for Englishmen traveling in France, demonstrated that they hadn't yet quite grasped the concept of putting in the stuff most likely to be useful. Since the guide contained among other gems the translation into French of this phrase:

"The postilion has been struck by lightning."

Not up on your 18th century vocabulary? A postilion is a servant who rides along outside on a post chaise or stagecoach. Or actually astride one of the horses in the traces. Sounds comfy. And you think it's hard to get good help *these days* ...

A modern Spanish phrase book that I own has learned this lesson well. It includes the phrase, "Pero preferiría una habitación sin alacranes."

Which means, "But I'd prefer a room without scorpions."

And finally, a tourist-related quote that's actually from a film instead of a travel book. And incidentally is serious and rather beautiful, so I'll put away the clown megaphone for a minute.

In John Boorman's wonderful, overlooked 1995 movie *Beyond Rangoon*, Patricia Arquette plays an American

woman touring Myanmar (formerly Burma) to escape memories of a recent family tragedy. Instead, she gets caught up in the bloodshed and danger of 1988's government crackdown on the democracy movement. Along the way, she meets a wise old professor (in a great-souled performance by U Aung Ko) who becomes her guide around the countryside — and across the blighted terrain of her own heart.

In one simple speech, which you should read aloud to yourself slowly, thoughtfully, and if possible with a sagacious Burmese accent, the professor sums up a crucial difference between East and West:

“We know that suffering is the one promise life always keeps.

“So that if happiness comes, we know it is a precious gift which is ours only for a brief time.”

FlimFan

Movies seen since last issue: *The Frighteners* (video), *Donnie Brasco*, *Marvin's Room*, *Waiting for Guffman*, *Gulliver's Travels* (video).

Director Rob Reiner used to say that one of his best reviews came from a cab driver, who said, “Five movies, Mr. Reiner, and not a stinker in the bunch!”

Of course, that was before Reiner made *North*. Or *Ghosts of Mississippi*.

Anyway, this month's crop of movies was so uniformly worthy that I can only repeat, in gratitude and wonder, “Not a stinker in the bunch,” and leave it at that.

Look for my reviews of *The Frighteners* and *Gulliver's Travels* in the next *Proper Boskonian*, if I make the deadline.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #321, February 1997

To George Flynn

Have admired Cecelia Holland since she was a girl wonder with her first historical novel in the 1960s, *The Firedrake*. She's a great worldbuilder: thrusts you from page 1 into the middle of her historical universe, and you must scramble to find context for yourself. What a trial it must be to her, being sometimes confused with a fourth-rater like Isabelle Holland. As though two of our favorite Golden Age masters had been named Robert Anson Jordan and Isaac Aspirin ...

To Anna Hillier

My wife Maureen, normally the most unastronomical of women, has become obsessed with Comet Hale-Bopp.

Or Hale-Bebop as she affectionately calls it.

We've gone out to observe it for several evenings past, and this morning (March 18) she awoke me at 4:00 a.m. to see it in the best (non-streetlighted) position yet. After which we discussed the comet belt, elliptical orbits, and ice as old as (local) time until we drifted off again to sleep.

To Jim Mann

I've seen Stephen Biesty's *Cross Sections: Man of War*; a great book indeed. Things I always cloudily skimmed over in Forester or O'Brian were made clear with one glance at his marvelous illustrations of life aboard H.M.S. *Victory*. However, Biesty indicates a lower status for ship's surgeons than Stephen Maturin had led me to expect. And by Neptune's trident, what dorky uniforms surgeons wore! Those little round hats ...

Everyone talks about what a great job the moviemakers did adapting that famously multilayered work *The English Patient* for film. On the other hand, I agree with you that the compression somewhat slights such elements as the frame tale. On the gripping hand, though, I still like some of the scenes this framing narrative brings into the movie, and on balance I'm still positive about it. On the *other* gripping hand, notice that *The English Patient* comes in at #10 on my list; there were at least 9 better films made last year.

To Lisa Hertel

Re your dismembering of the cover art, blurb, and interior copyediting of Robert Sawyer's *Starplex*: obviously you've been infected with professionaliasis, a dread disease related to anhedonia that prevents you from finding any joy in a previously pleasurable hobby due to progressive deamateurization.

We could order in a bluesuited Level 4 decon team and spray chemicals all over the NESFA clubhouse. But I feel that a more radical course of action might produce even more optimal results: surfeit aversion therapy.

So keep working on NESFA Press projects. I predict a complete cure within 6 months.

To Ray Bowie

They say there's no one so alone as a man in pain. We all mercifully forget what it's like until the next time we experience it. Probably a healthy defense mechanism.

This makes it difficult to comment on your hospitalization last month, though, Ray. Since "Jesus, that's awful" and "How can you stand it?" are so inadequate. You stand it because you must.

As I get older, I find I pay more and more attention to stories about illness and hospitals. Prepping myself with little glimpses of a place where I'm likely to end up spending a fair amount of time, eventually, probably, ugh.

Thanks for blazing the trail, bud ...

To Michael Burstein

Re your story about Ellis Island immigrants encountering ice cream and spreading this "sweet butter" on their bread: I knew some (mainland) Chinese engineers once, staying here for a 6-month project. They hated to criticize, but admitted they couldn't understand what Americans liked about pizza. (They'd picked up some in the supermarket.) For their taste, it was way too cold, white, and crunchy.

To Tony Lewis

Glad to hear that *Asimov's/Analog* changed their minds about using computer art exclusively. This way, after what I've decided to call some Cometkaze hits Earth, survivors can still publish issues in the ruins without electricity.

To Nomi Burstein

Sounds like you and Michael joined all the usual NESFAns in putting mucho sweat equity into Boskone. On behalf of this useless parasitic con-goer instead of -giver, a thousand thanks.

After all that hauling 2-liter bottles around, can you ever again look a soda in the cap?

To Joe Ross

For your column's 100th occurrence, perhaps a Best of Joe's Jokes issue? Either that or a Joe Ross Secret Origin double issue.

Much enjoyed your latest. The people I shared the *Star Wars* quips with in my office are unanimous that the one about Jabba's brother — Pizza the Hut — most tickled our apparently easily stimulated funny bones.

To Paul Giguere

I thought the Boskone Pocket Program you did was perhaps the most attractive in recent memory. Thanks to you and all the unsung staplers.

It could have been worse. What if you'd had to bind every Ford book by hand instead?

To Mark Olson

Nice, rich APA contribution, Mark, with book reviews, thoughtful responsa, and a fascinating look at the birds, bookstores, etc. of the Corpus Christi area. At times like these, I think of you as the heart of this APA.

And maybe Tony Lewis gets to be the spine. Beyond that, I'll let everyone else choose his or her own body part. But remember, this is NESFA, so there is no head.

Just to prove we're awake out here, the price you quoted for the Ford book — \$212.00 — seems a tad high. Even at this inflated end of the twentieth century.