



Songs of the Baka and Other Discoveries: Travels after Sixty-Five

Dennis James

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Friends and family warned them of malaria, dengue fever, and cannibals, but for retired lawyers Dennis James and his wife, Barbara, the lure of learning from indigenous people who still live much as humans had twelve thousand years ago, of visiting countries the US State Department warns against, and of trekking through pristine, rarely visited landscapes was too strong to resist. Their goal: to learn how different cultures, some of them centuries old, manage to survive, resist change, and be happy; and to discover what Westerners might learn from them.

They were warmly welcomed by tribes in Papua New Guinea, farmers in Ethiopia, the cliff-dwelling Dogon in Mali, and the hunter-gatherer Baka Pygmies of Cameroon. They visited Algerian cities ruled by men—where married women were one-eyed wraiths swathed in white—and trekked with Sherpas in Nepal. They stayed in places with no toilets or showers, experienced “acrophobia morphing into vertigo” while navigating narrow ledges along steep volcanic cliffs, and dealt with injuries and health issues. They reveled in Cuba’s thriving arts scene, visited an Iranian Zoroastrian temple in which a flame has been burning since 470 AD, and experienced how cold numbers cannot convey the depth of people’s suffering in Gaza. In some of the most primitive spots, they found beautiful, clean communities where, despite the lack of material things, no one ever went hungry or uncared for. Everywhere, they found friendly, kind, hospitable people. They also learned how fragile some of these communities are and how vulnerable they are to climate change and the incursion of Western culture.

They returned “irrevocably changed,” with a wealth of stories and beautiful photos to share, and deeply aware that no matter how different people seem, they all want the same things: peace, adequate food and shelter, and a good life for their children.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March/April 2017)

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