Traveler's Diarrhea

Andrew Bombeck
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Traveler's Diarrhea is an engaging, wryly humorous chronicle of travel to out-of-the-ordinary places.

Forget the off-putting cover and the even more off-putting promise of humor “guaranteed to cause abdominal cramps, nausea” and far worse. Beneath these dire warnings, Andrew Bombeck’s Traveler’s Diarrhea is one of the most entertaining travel memoirs to come along in years.

The author launched his first around-the-world voyage at the age of ten, pretending for an entire summer that his backyard was the ocean, with an old cot as his vessel. The travel bug blossomed. Throughout the 1980s, when the author was in his late twenties, he traveled almost continuously, returning home just long enough to recover from various tropical ailments or remind himself how ill-suited he was to a stay-put lifestyle.

Traveler’s Diarrhea is based on journals he kept, chronicling his adventures in mostly off-the-grid destinations, including two stints as a teacher with the Peace Corps—one in Samoa and a second in Liberia—and visits to Morocco, India, and remote hiking trails high in the Andes.

The author proclaims at the outset that he is not a “real writer,” reserving that term for his late mother, humorist Erma Bombeck, and his screenwriter brother. The next two hundred pages prove this disclaimer wrong. His writing is unfailingly real—full of self-deprecating wit, wry observations, and sharply observed details. Its sentences can seem a bit frenetic, jumping back and forth in time and making unexpected segues, but it all works. The narrative has a knack for delivering just the kind of tidbits that make a place come alive, like the fact that, in Tonga in 1981, the favored hairstyle for men was a large, perfectly shaped Afro that, paired with American t-shirts and khakis, made them resemble Linc from The Mod Squad.

The focus is almost always on people, experiences, and misadventures—like the time Bombeck took his class on a nature hike to a waterfall and the students spontaneously decided to strip off their clothes and go swimming. Personal anecdotes and descriptions of the people he meets keep the pace brisk and the landscape fresh.

There seems to be no activity too taxing, too troublesome, or too risky to undertake. Rebels who cut electricity to the hotel in Lima by blowing up the grid do not alter plans to hike through their territory to Machu Picchu; a brawl on a crowded bus in India is described with bemused gusto rather than annoyance at the delay. Though the author today is considerably older than he was at the time of these travels, his youthful enthusiasm and openheartedness shine through on every page.

Over two hundred snapshots taken in the course of Bombeck’s travels are reproduced in color, often showing the author with a big grin, literally open-armed to the entire world. Aside from giving the book a personal feel and likability, the pictures also conjure a bit of nostalgia, showing a slightly orange-tinted world where hair was longer, tech was lower, and roads were less traveled.

Traveler’s Diarrhea is an engaging, wryly humorous chronicle of travel to out-of-the-ordinary places by someone who,
rather than just pass through, went to embrace, absorb, and bring back a bit of the greater world’s spirit.

SUSAN WAGGONER (September 26, 2018)

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