

SPECIAL TRAVEL ISSUE

High Country News

For people who care about the West

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

'Foreigners' from near and far
are fascinated by the American West



April 13, 2015 | \$5 | Vol. 47 No. 6 | www.hcn.org

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Strangers in a familiar land



A few years ago, my family and I lived for a while in Germany. Soon after we returned, we went for a hike in the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness Area in northwestern New Mexico. Bisti is surely one of the weirder and more obscure

wilderness areas out there, a collection of otherworldly rock formations and badlands, surrounded by high desert grazing land and oil and gas wells. It sharply contrasts with the soaring peaks, wildflower meadows and crashing whitewater in the Weminuche Wilderness, just a couple hours north, and is not nearly as well known as Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon or the region's other landmarks.

I figured we'd have the place to ourselves — besides the cows that had broken through the fence — so when we saw a few cars in the dirt parking lot, at least half of them with non-New Mexico plates, I was surprised. I was even more surprised to see, in the hikers' register, that many recent visitors had come from Switzerland, France, even Lithuania. That Europeans were in New Mexico wasn't unusual — the foreign fascination for the American West is well known. But in Bisti? Surely they must be lost.

About a half-mile into our hike, we encountered a German family and asked them what brought them to Bisti. They said they'd been looking for somewhere to pause during the long drive between Mesa Verde and the Grand Canyon, and saw Bisti on a German website. And they loved it.

Later, I went in search of the website and found not one, but several travelogues from Germans in the American West. To my (admittedly chauvinistic) surprise, they wanted more than the stereotypical big-ticket destinations, and so they encouraged their fellow countrymen to leave the beaten path in search of obscure spots that even many locals haven't visited. Their fascinating descriptions — of hidden slot canyons and little-known ancient pueblos — allowed me to see places that I thought I knew intimately in a new light, through the eyes of those to whom the wilderness and wide-open skies of the West are downright alien.

This international-tourism themed edition of *High Country News'* annual Travel Issue is designed to help you see our home through more or less "foreign" eyes — whether they belong to Asian tourists on a tour bus through the Mojave, or Colorado children in the backwaters of Alaska. "Raccoonboy" will guide you through your unexpectedly foreign backyard, and a flowchart will let you know what kind of public land you're visiting. We even have an "extraterrestrial" correspondent to guide wandering aliens (like you and me) through the wilds of Portland. Because the West is always mysterious if you approach it with open eyes. In the end, we're all just visitors here.

We hope you enjoy this detour away from our regular content, and that it helps you see the West anew.

—Jonathan Thompson, senior editor



BROOKE WARREN

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hcn.org/grandtetonwolf



DARYL HUNTER

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hcn.org/webonly/grandtetonwolf



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CRAIG CHILDS

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STRANGE LAND

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By Craig Childs

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By Betsy Marston



COVER

A giant aluminum alien stands outside the Alien Research Center along Nevada's Extraterrestrial Highway.

TEEMU TUULOSKORPI

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

“Rather than the feds imposing an arbitrary fee, maybe they should make it a market with open bidding for grazing rights.”

—Bob Macgregor, commenting on “An Obama administration proposal would more than double grazing fees” hcne.ws/grazingfees



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CHILDS



GILMAN



GLADFELTER



MERNIT (RIGHT)



WARREN



ZINDEL

CONTRIBUTORS

Craig Childs, an HCN contributing editor, writes from western Colorado.

Sarah Gilman, formerly HCN's associate editor at the home base of Paonia, Colorado, is a contributing editor in Portland, Oregon.

Bryce Gladfelter, an adventurer at heart, has traversed the Rockies on a llama, crossed paths with grizzlies in Alaska, and survived Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. He illustrates from his log cabin home studio in Pennsylvania.

Kindra McQuillan, a recent University of Montana grad, is an HCN editorial intern.

Judith Lewis Mernit (shown below left, on right, with Zo Sun-Hwa) is a contributing editor at *High Country News*. She has also written for *Sierra*, *Capital and Main*, *TakePart*, *The Atlantic*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Roger Minick has been making photographs for the past 50 years. His work is included in permanent collections at The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Smithsonian.

Leath Tonino's writing appears in *Orion*, *The Sun*, *Sierra*, *Tricycle*, *New England Review* and other publications. He lives in San Francisco and edits poetry part-time for the Afghan Women's Writing Project.

Teemu Tuuloskorpi shot our cover photograph while on a first-time visit to the United States from his native Finland with fiancée Suvi-Jaana. The couple married in a small Las Vegas chapel, then stopped to capture the photograph en route to Area 51 in Rachel, Nevada.

Brooke Warren is a photojournalist and HCN associate designer.

Udo Zindel was born in Stuttgart, Germany. He has worked for Southwest German Public Radio Since 1987. He spent August 1993 as a visiting journalist with *High Country News*. Currently, he works as a gardener at a former monastery on River Neckar.

Kudos for *HCN* writers

Former *HCN* intern **Nick Neely** (spring 2010) just received the 2015 John Burroughs Nature Essay Award for his essay “The Book of Agate,” in the Fall/Winter 2014-’15 issue of *Ninth Letter*, a literary journal from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Nick is currently a writer-in-residence at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology on the Oregon coast. “Neely, who declares himself a collector of stones and of places, gives evidence in this essay that he is also a quietly adroit collector of readers,” wrote the judges. Past recipients include **Michael Pollan, Rick Bass, Brian Doyle and Scott Russell Sanders**.

In March, Ducks Unlimited presented the 2015 Wetland Achievement Award for Communications to *HCN* contributor **Hal Herring**. Paul Schmidt, the group’s chief conservation officer, lauded Herring for doing a “lengthy and extraordinary job of covering sportsmen’s issues, water quality and quantity issues, habitat loss from the prairies to the Gulf Coast and other conservation-focused topics.” Congratulations, guys!

Two of our contributors have new books. **David Gessner** journeys across the West, seeking the legacy of two iconic writers: **Wallace Stegner** and **Ed Abbey**. *All the Wild That Remains* (W.W.

Norton & Company) is “equal parts criticism, biography, environmental call-to-arms, and irrepressible personal travelogue.” **Jeremy Smith** just released *Epic Measures* (HarperCollins), “the true story of a 20-year, 500-scientist, \$100-million moonshot attempt to track and quantify every illness, injury, and death for everyone on Earth. ... (to discover) what really hurts us and what will best improve our health.”

NOTE FROM A MISSED VISITOR

Recently, we asked visitors who’d been to our Paonia, Colorado, office, but not seen their names printed, to contact us. Reader **Ray Miller** wrote: “I was there in September of last year. It was in the midst of congressional election campaigning, environmental voting issues, and changes to the *HCN* board, so I see why it happened. I live in Bayfield, Colorado, and moved here with my wife, Janice, in September 2013. I retired as lead wetland scientist after 20 years with the South Florida Water Management District. My wife was a school administrator. ... We are enjoying retirement and like fly-fishing, hiking, biking and visiting new craft breweries. I am a volunteer for the Colorado River Watch program.” Thanks, Ray!

CORRECTIONS

In the March 16 issue, a caption placed Wallowa in Washington; it’s in Oregon.

In the March 2 issue, for the “Endangered Languages” map, it should be noted that all locations are approximate and that Census figures are projections, not actual counts. #23, Cocopah, should have been near Yuma, Arizona, and #59, Chemehuevi, on the Colorado River. Yavapai, #43, and Maricopa, #53, should have been switched. #62 is duplicated; the California instance should be deleted. #38, Makah, is missing and should be on the northwest tip of the Olympic Peninsula. For the corrected map see hcn.ws/1EGgfmU. Also, there is a small handful of surviving speakers of a critically endangered dialect of Paviotso, all of whom live in Bridgeport, California. Linguist Maziar Toosarvandani is working with three of them to build a dictionary and story compendium. Endangered Languages Project collaborators also include Eastern Michigan University, First Peoples’ Cultural Council, and several other groups. *HCN* regrets the errors.

—Jodi Peterson for the staff

LETTERS

Send letters to editor@hcn.org or Editor, *HCN*, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. Prefer tweeting? Try #HCNletters. Letters may be edited for length or clarity.

BOLD-FACE CONQUER

“Unite and Conquer” was a puzzling article (*HCN*, 3/2/15). I think the title should have had “Unite” in very small lower case and “Conquer” in large, capitalized bold face.

Your heroine comes across as an 800-pound gorilla with a typical, to me, Las Vegas attitude: Give me what I want or I’ll bury you with my money. “Nevada has very little water,” Mulroy says, “but the one thing I have is millions and millions of dollars, and I can afford to spend years in the Supreme Court fighting you all.” For those of us who live in the mountains whence the water comes, that is an all-too-familiar refrain. Las Vegas, the Colorado Front Range — pick your demon. They all think the same, as, unfortunately, your author. They decide to build a city where a city is unsustainable and then they go looking for less powerful or wealthy people who have what they want or “need” and set about scheming how to get it. Can you say “money”? That is not the approach I expected *HCN* to champion.

Funny how Mulroy uses the only real long-term solution as a threat: “outmigrating 40 million people.” The numbers are extreme but the principle behind them is the reality all must face



at some point. The question is: Will they suck all the rest of us dry before they face it? And as for paying for the “research” through the *HCN* Research Fund, that is disappointing, too. You normally do much better.

Craig Current
Grand Lake, Colorado

MULROY’S PLAN B

“Unite and Conquer” left out an important fact about Mulroy’s Plan B to pump groundwater from rural eastern Nevada to Las Vegas. At least part of the groundwater

in question is shared with Utah and used by ranchers in Utah’s West Desert. In 2013, Utah Gov. Gary Herbert decided not to sign an agreement with Nevada over water rights in the area, which cast doubt on the future of Mulroy’s pumping project. In February 2015, the Utah Geological Survey released results from a seven-year hydro-geologic study of groundwater in the region. The study indicated that potential groundwater development in Nevada and Utah would lower groundwater levels and reduce spring flow in west central Utah that is used to support agriculture, sensitive species habitat and vegetation for grazing. In addition, the study

revealed that current groundwater use is slowly depleting the aquifer. The Plan B battle lines aren’t limited to rural-vs.-urban Nevada.

Gretchen DuBois
Salt Lake City, Utah

OUT-MIGRATION OPTION

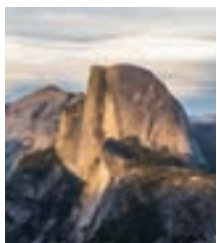
I found “Unite and Conquer” fascinating, informative and thorough. It appears Ms. Mulroy has moved the Southwest water conversation to greater depths indeed. What I find disappointing, however, is that despite all talk of openness, one option is unfortunately dismissed out of hand. Why not spend the billion dollars suggested for a groundwater-pumping alternative to pay people to out-migrate and limit future in-migration? The arid Southwest has never been a place where water exists to support a large human population. Let’s listen to and respect the Earth and “nature’s ways” and not attempt to technologize around its given reality. Techno-solutions always lose in the end, despite short-term wins, and endanger and harm others in the process.

Baz Stevens
Freeland, Washington

IN FROM THE WEB

Reader comment; more at hcn.org

Delaine Spilsbury: Actually, one name has stuck for Pat Mulroy’s massive pipeline project to take water from the rest of Nevada. We Rurals call this economic cannibalism “the Watergrab.”



Travelers from afar

International tourists in the West, by the numbers

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

25

Percent of visitors to Yosemite National Park in summer 2009 who were from a country other than the United States

13

Percent of those who were from Germany

21

Number of languages used by collective respondents to a survey of Yosemite National Park visitors in 2009. Languages included Armenian, Farsi, Mien and Urdu

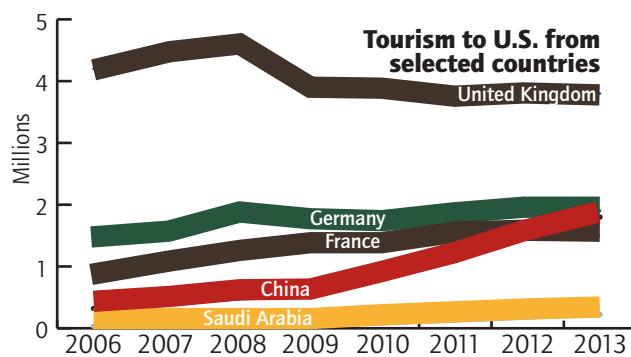


36

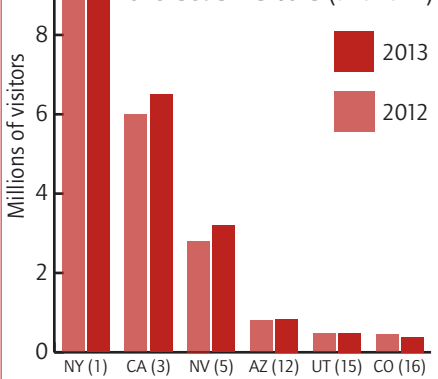
Percent of visitors to Arches National Park in 2003 that were from countries other than the U.S.

SOURCES: YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK SUMMER 2009 VISITOR STUDY

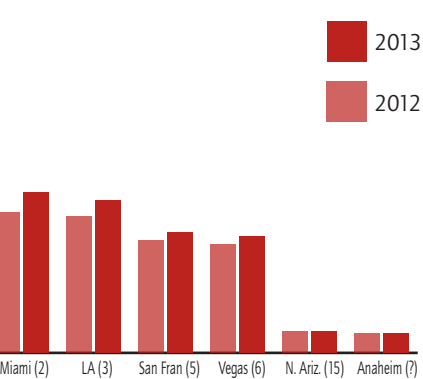
Where they're from, where they go



Top states visited by overseas visitors (and rank)



Top cities/regional areas visited by overseas visitors (and rank)



Rank of U.S. gateways, 2014*

- 3** L.A.
- 5** San Fran
- 17** Sea-Tac
- 20** Las Vegas

*International nonstop flights



LAX. CC VIA WIKIPEDIA

88m

Projected number of foreign visitors to U.S. by 2019.

Largest percentage of growth:

- 172** China
- 72** Columbia
- 47** India
- 43** Brazil
- 38** Mexico

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE INTERNATIONAL TRADE ADMINISTRATION, FALL TRAVEL FORECAST, OCTOBER 2014

THE WILD WEST



460 Approximate number of Trip Advisor reviews of Bullets and Burgers, a high-caliber shooting range for tourists outside of Las Vegas, written by visitors who identified themselves as being from a country other than the U.S.

89 Number of Trip Advisor reviews of Battlefield Vegas, another military-grade shooting range for tourists, written in Portuguese.

100 Percent of Portuguese reviews that gave Battlefield Vegas at least four out of five stars.

Romanians Sergio and Laura pose with the big guns at Bullets and Burgers in Las Vegas.

PHOTO COURTESY BULLETS AND BURGERS. STATISTICS: TRIP ADVISOR



85 **87** **88**
Percentage of Chinese, German and United Kingdom visitors to the U.S., respectively, who go shopping while on vacation.

78 **79** **80**
Percentage who engage in sightseeing.

36 **41** **37**
Percentage who visit national parks or monuments.

\$18.7 **\$5.5** **\$9.8**
Billions of dollars spent by Chinese, German and UK visitors to the United States, respectively, on travel (including education) in 2013.

SOURCE: TRAVEL.TRADE.GOV. ICONS: THENOUNPROJECT.COM; SHOPPING CART: NAOMI ATKINSON

Where the heck am I?

There are around 760 million acres of public land scattered across the 11 Western states and Alaska, managed by several different entities, each with its own set of rules and regulations. This can be a bit confusing, even for experienced wanderers, so we've put together these (general, playful, by no means set in stone) guidelines to help you figure out what kind of public land you're on, and exactly what you can do on it. All you have to do is look around. KINDRA MCQUILLAN



You're on a restricted military bombing range. Duck and cover. The Department of Defense manages 19 million acres of training ranges, military bases, and more. If you see a two-headed tortoise, you might be on a nuclear test site. Leave now.

Oh, sh**!
Fortunately, just blue sky overhead.

You might be on **BLM** land. Under the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Land Management manages over 700 million acres of subsurface minerals and 248 million acres of surface land for the multiple uses of productivity and enjoyment – mostly mining, grazing, recreation, and preservation. Originally dismissed as land “nobody wanted” because homesteaders rejected it (it’s usually arid and un-timbered), BLM surface land is now used by millions of recreationists and lots of cows; there are around 18,000 active grazing permits. So enjoy yourself! Camp, hike, four-wheel (on authorized trails only, please) and bring your dog. Some restrictions do apply: Hunting and fishing require permits, for example, so check first, and watch for grouchy bulls.

You might be on **trust** land. The nation’s 46 million acres of state trust land are managed by individual states to generate money for local schools, though strategies for doing so vary wildly. Some areas are developed or leased; some are mined, grazed or logged; some are conserved or preserved for tourism and recreation. Often, permits are required for recreation here, so check with your state’s trust lands administrator.

You might be in a **national forest**. Under the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Forest Service manages 193 million acres of forest resources – mainly for recreation and logging. Bring your tent and dog. You need a permit to hunt or harvest trees and other “forest products” in designated areas, and you’re welcome to motor on open roads and trails. Please don’t burn the forest down with an ill-maintained campfire, and respect seasonal fire bans.

Start here!

Do you see cow patties?

Yes, and I stepped in a fresh one...

Nope, not a plop.

Is sagebrush the tallest thing around?

Do you see RVs?

Why yes! And bathroom facilities too.

Nope.

Well, I'm taller, but it's the tallest plant.

Nah.

Do you see extra-terrestrials disguised as top-secret military officers?

Can you spot an oil well or a row of fake adobe mini-mansions?

Um, no?

Is *that* what they are?

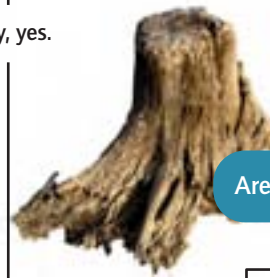
Why, yes.

I can't.

Is a missile headed directly toward you?

You're probably in Area 51. Prepare to be abducted and/or "investigated."

Are there clear-cuts?



Yep, stumps all around.

No, unless you count stumps under high-water mark.



Is there a gift shop where you can buy a T-shirt with a cartoon moose on it?

No, but I wish. It would be the best way to remember this trip.

Yes, and my kids became Junior Rangers.

You might be at a **state park**, managed for your enjoyment and heritage by your state government. There should be lots of opportunities for polite recreation, although probably not hunting and four-wheeling. Plus, you'll probably need to pay fees for entry and camping.

You might be in a **national park**! The National Park Service manages over 84 million acres for preservation, heritage and enjoyment. That means you can recreate, as long as it doesn't interfere with preservation or the enjoyment of others. Don't bring your dog, usually, don't even think about hunting or gathering, much less four-wheeling or mountain-biking, and get ready to pay some fees and rub elbows with the other 300 million annual national park visitors. Consider getting a yearly pass to enjoy some of the most beautiful scenery in the country.



Do you see mountain bikers on the sick single-track?

Yep, they're flying around the curves.

Nope.

Are people wearing binoculars?

No, and I feel uncool with mine.

Yep, and I ticked a few birds off my life list.

You might be in **wilderness**. The National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and BLM manage around 110 million acres of wilderness to protect its "primeval character." Generally, you can hike, camp and hunt, but since the goal here is preservation, mechanized recreation is not allowed. Then again, because of the varied goals and histories of the agencies involved, these areas aren't always pristine. Some wilderness areas are even grazed. Enjoy the quiet, but watch for "road apples" (horse manure).

Are there motorboats?

I'm on a boat.

Nowhere in sight.

You could be in a **national recreation area** or on **Bureau of Reclamation land**, both of which can sometimes be grazed, mined or developed and also offer recreational opportunities, often on the reservoirs that store much of the West's water. Check for permission first, and apologize to Ed Abbey's ghost for enjoying Lake Powell.

You might be at a **national monument**. Managed by the NPS, USFS, USFWS or BLM, for scenic and historic preservation and enjoyment, they welcome well-behaved visitors, including mountain bikers. (Please stay on the trails!) Often, there's no hunting or four-wheeling, but depending on the agency in charge, there are exceptions; you might see grazing or oil and gas development.

You might be on a **state or national wildlife refuge**. Managed by USFWS or state fish and game agencies, more than 90 million acres are set aside for the conservation of wild animals, from pygmy owls and long-toed salamanders to bison and polar bears. Mountain biking may be allowed, along with hunting or fishing – but check for permission first, and make sure you have a valid license.



One more thing...

Did you enter an Indian reservation and not exit it?

Yes.

Not this time.

Start at the top!

You might be on **tribal trust or fee land**. Management of these lands varies a great deal; you may be trespassing or you may need to purchase a permit to explore, recreate, hunt or fish on tribal lands. Check with the tribal administration's website.



On the road with America's sightseers

A photographer looks at three decades of tourism

PHOTOS BY ROGER MINICK





Couple viewing Grand Tetons, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1980, above. Sleeper tour bus at Goulding, Arizona, 1980, below.

In 1976, Roger Minick was shepherding a group of photography students through the crowds at the famous Inspiration Point overlook in Yosemite National Park. Tourists with clicking camera shutters and coordinated outfits pushed their way past his students, intently focused on taking snapshots of both the vista and themselves. At first, Minick was irritated, but the repetitive performance eventually sparked his curiosity.

And so, in the summer of 1979, Minick and his wife began a road trip around the United States to photograph sightseers. His subjects were often harried, working their way through a tight schedule of attractions. So Minick took a direct approach to them, explaining that he hoped the project “might be seen in years to come as a kind of time capsule of what Americans looked like at the end of the 20th century.” To his surprise, many nodded their heads in assent, as if that made perfect sense.

He came to see the crowds as their own species, *Sight-seer americanus*, the American on holiday, avidly touring the nation’s great attractions. His images capture the humor of families and individuals, clad in brightly colored T-shirts, desperate to capture each fleeting moment at every destination.

Minick returned to the series in the 1990s and in 2000. In that time, he saw more visitors, more cellphones, more foreigners. But the essence of *S. americanus* remained unchanged: the eager rush from sight to sight, the vivid clothes, and always the camera, slung around the craning neck. KATE SCHIMEL

WEB EXTRA More photos online at hcn.org.

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Photographing Old Faithful Geyser, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, 1980. Couple at Sunset Point, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah, 1981. Boy with headress at Lower Falls Overlook, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, 1980. Woman photographing in Glacier National Park, Montana, 1980.





Extraterrestrial weekend

Dispatches from a dryland alien in Portland

BY SARAH GILMAN



Ever since pilot Kenneth Arnold reported saucer-shaped objects flying near Mount Rainier in 1947, spawning the term “flying saucer,” the Northwest has drawn extraterrestrial tourists. Last year, Oregon led the nation in per capita UFO sightings, many of them in Portland. But the typical alien sojourn appears to be a mere flyby, sans a single visit to a vegan strip club. Perhaps, like tattoo-less Midwestern tourists in ill-fitting pants, they feel out of place here.

As a recent transplant from rural Colorado, I can relate. What we aliens need, I figure, is an outsiders’ guide to insider Portland. So, on a rainy Saturday, I don a silver onesie and homemade alien mask, and set out by bike to concoct one.

First, I pedal along the Willamette River’s industrial waterfront, where I peer at graffiti-decorated freight trains, then hit the Eastbank Esplanade, a multi-use path with great views of downtown that connects to the lengthy Springwater Corridor trail. Two women spotted a cigar-shaped UFO here in 2004. But all I see are passing joggers who studiously avoid meeting my black ovoid eyes. Hoping for friendly banter, I ask a man at an overlook — an out-of-towner like me — to snap my picture. But he returns my iPhone as if it burns him and strides swiftly away.

Just to the east is the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, where I pocket my alien face (no masks allowed) and visit a large public display of human fetuses. At a computer terminal, I age my actual 33-year-old face to a wizened 58, then wander a maze representing the hydrologic cycle, “falling” from the sky as a raindrop on a diminutive zipline before a spin of a giant dial “contaminates” me with mercury and I “flow” into a

trash-filled “ocean.”

Portland’s oldest planned neighborhood, Ladd’s Addition, lies several blocks farther east. With picturesque houses, big trees and main streets arranged in a giant X, it makes an inviting UFO landing pad for extraterrestrials hoping to sample the profusion of great restaurants and shops on nearby Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard and Southeast Division Street. After grabbing a rich Vietnamese bone-broth soup and a microbrew at the Double Dragon, I pop into the Independent Publishing Resource Center to watch locals make prints on ancient letterpresses, then buy a ’zine from a converted cigarette machine.

Oaks Amusement Park, where UFOs were spotted shortly after Arnold’s sighting, is a pleasant ride south down the Springwater trail. It offers roller skating—curious aliens a historic wooden rink complete with a Wurlitzer pipe organ. At the evening roller-derby class, instructor Next of Ken teaches us to crossover our skates and speed in tight circles. Perhaps because we ETs are more accustomed to interdimensional movement, however, my skates tend to fly out from under me.

HAUS Shows, a network of private homes that host occasional concerts, are easier on the tailbone. At that night’s venue, I squeeze onto a sofa amid hip young people to listen to sweet-sounding folk and Americana. The singer from a Colorado band smiles at me with something like recognition: “Luchadorable!” he exclaims.

Even so, being an alien is exhausting: Baristas ignore you, passersby yell obscenities. So fellow extraterrestrials might consider escaping for a hike in Forest Park, one of the nation’s largest urban parks, where moss-furred trees exude the homey air of an *X-Files* set.

To warm up after, head for a soak at Common Ground Wellness Cooperative, a co-ed, clothing-optional hot-tub spa.

Then there’s the Peculiarium — an oddity emporium and art gallery in northwest Portland.

The alien autopsy display is insulting (I

would *never* use barbecue tongs to handle intestines!), but I have my picture taken with it anyway, then befriend the giant Sasquatch and contemplate a life-sized gummy brain on a Styrofoam tray.

But it is zoobombing that fills my alien heart with the most joy. Participants meet every Sunday night to ride kiddie bikes at lightning speed down one of the city’s tallest hills. Around 10 p.m., I join a dozen men and women fiddling with custom rigs as hiphop pumps from a set of speakers lashed to an ancient road bike. Some strap on dirt-bike helmets with full face-shields. “Cheap dental insurance,” one zoobomber explains helpfully. A sprightly woman in striped stockings and garter belts calls out the rules: *Don’t block people! Yell out when you see a car! Don’t leave anyone behind!* Then we’re off, screaming around steep turns on rain-shimmered streets through silent neighborhoods. Ahead of me, a man in a studded denim vest with “DROPOUT” emblazoned across the shoulders miraculously stays upright atop a bike built for a kindergartener that keeps losing its chain.

I stop at West Burnside Street, the downtown drag that will lead me to my truck, and watch the other zoobombers descend. Through my mesh eyeholes, their evenly spaced taillights seem to blur into one graceful machine. Like a UFO, gliding out of sight into the city. ■

“Alien” Sarah Gilman, clockwise from top right: Hiking an old firelane in Forest Park; taking in the view of Portland’s famous bridges from the Eastbank Esplanade; visiting a kindred spirit at the Peculiarium; sipping a cappuccino at Random Order, a funky coffee, cocktail and pie joint.

SARAH GILMAN

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The West in 72 Hours

*Asian tourists look for space, spectacles
and a decent bowl of noodles*



Somewhere along Pierce Ferry Road, on a bus driving away from the Grand Canyon, Nguyen Thi Ngoc Lien started to give me a massage. An index finger on one side of my right lobe, her middle finger behind it, she began to rub, up and down, up and down, with the ferocity of a coyote digging a rodent from its den. She paused, took a tiny triangular bottle of liquid the color of dark beer from her purse whose contents smelled strongly of camphor. She removed the cap and turned it upside down on her fingertip, thrust her finger decisively into my ear canal, and twisted.

Nguyen, 48, lives in Ho Chi Minh City with her husband, Tran Phuoc, and their 12-year-old daughter. Lithe and sophisticated, she had abundant black hair cut in layers and luminous bisque-colored skin, which she protected devoutly with a broad green scarf. She had come to the United States to visit her sister, who lives in Los Angeles, but also to see the West: Its low points and high points, its shimmering vistas and legendary infrastructure, its neon-blighted cities and unfathomable stretches of open space. Like me, she and her husband and child were traveling on a bus operated by San Francisco-based Lassen Tours, which caters to tourists from Asia. She had been assigned a seat next to me because she was among the few in our group who could speak a little English, and our buoyant

guide, a 52-year-old Hong Kong native named Raymond Tse, suspected I was lonely.

I wasn't, though. Not really. By the end of a third day among people whose cultures, food choices, languages and political landscapes differed radically from my own, I had learned to negotiate a certain place of vulnerability and belonging. People had begun to smile at me, with the grounding relief of recognition in their eyes; they held open doors, waved me along to walk with them. Language is just one of the many ways in which humans communicate, I thought, and not always necessary.

I did, however, have a headache. We had just left the Grand Canyon's West Rim, on Hualapai Nation land, when it hit; I had told Nguyen about only because I needed to stop talking. The dry desert air, hatless hours in the sun and the dehydration that comes with the fear of infrequent bathroom breaks had all conspired to drive an imaginary knife into my right sinus cavity. So Nguyen let me fall silent, and went about her work. Finished with my ear, she moved on to my forehead, then to my head itself, making vigorous circles with her fingertips that pulled on my every fine hair. My eyes flooded with tears.

"I learned it from a book," Nguyen said of her massage technique. She uses it on herself and her family whenever her city's suffocating pollution makes them sick. When she finally let up, about 50 miles from Las Vegas, I felt weak, exhausted,

I wanted to see how tourists from Asia adapt, in so little time, to a land that must seem as extraordinary as the moon.

Korean tourists Zo Sun-Hwa and Park Young-Gu take a selfie at the salt flats in Death Valley National Park.





“BUS?” I said again, following the American-tourist rule that if people don’t understand you, speak louder.

emotional. But the headache was gone.

“You need to learn to do it yourself,” Nguyen counseled. “And this, too.” She grabbed my right hand, pressed her thumb hard in the space between my thumb and forefinger. I yelped. “Do it everyday. For your headache. For the pollution.” She took my other hand, yanked it toward her, pinched hard. I was cured.

I had taken Nguyen’s ministrations as more evidence that people on this trip felt at ease with me, but in truth Nguyen was almost as much of an anomaly as I was. We were both navigating language difficulties, both eating unfamiliar food. While our bus sometimes took on a couple from New Zealand or a family from India, the vast majority of Lassen’s clientele is Mandarin-speaking Chinese.

This is a recent phenomenon: Though China has been the fastest-growing tourism market in the world for a decade or more, Chinese tourism to the U.S. didn’t really take off until 2010, when Obama’s Commerce Department launched Brand USA, a marketing effort aimed at foreign visitors. Two years later, Obama streamlined the review process for Chinese tourist visas, and the results were dramatic: In 2010, more than 800,000 visitors came to the U.S. from China, 52 percent more than the year before. In 2014, more than 2 million came, making China the fifth-largest source of foreign visitors to the U.S., behind only Canada, Mexico, the U.K. and Japan.

A robust industry has grown up around them. I chose Lassen Tours for its bilingual guides; a couple of others I tried seemed to prefer Mandarin only. Hotels along tour routes deliver congee-and-dim-sum room-service breakfasts; retailers hire Mandarin-fluent staff. At tourist sights, Chinese passengers spill out of buses by the hundreds, relishing low-priced opportunities to cover a lot of ground at a breathtaking pace, without the complications of traffic or language.

I wanted to see what the West looked like to them, to experience anew the places I take

for granted. I wanted to see how tourists from Asia adapt, in so little time, to a land that must seem as extraordinary as the moon.

MY JOURNEY HAD BEGUN THREE DAYS EARLIER, in San Jose, California, when I boarded Lassen Tours’ imposing luxury coach with a married couple from Shenzhen, China, Liu “Lili” Lei and her husband, Liu Lian Min. She was slight, prim and impeccably dressed, in black-and-pink two-toned ballet flats, a white blouse and a black-and-pink skirt. Her husband was equally trim, with salt-and-pepper hair and a handsome square jaw. A few moments earlier, when they walked up to the meeting spot in front of a restaurant in San Jose’s predominantly Asian North Valley, I had cloddishly asked, in English, whether they were waiting for the bus. Liu tittered and made fluttering gestures with her hands; I mimed a driver at a colossal steering wheel, commandeering what probably looked like a tank.

“BUS?” I said again, following the American-tourist rule that if people don’t understand you, speak louder. She nodded her small head rapidly, and we laughed.

San Jose is just one of several cities from which Lassen collects travelers; when we boarded, the bus was already full of passengers who had loaded up in San Francisco, including the photographer I’d be working with, Brooke Warren. Lassen operates a daily web of intersecting routes originating on the West Coast and winding throughout the West. Some veer off to Disneyland; some go to Los Angeles, still others, in the summer, head north to Yosemite. Gams of tour buses form in fast-food parking lots to take on new passengers and let go of others. Tse ushered them on and off as if he were guiding ducklings across busy streets.

“If you go to Las Vegas, you are going to stay on *my bus*,” Tse said, articulating his words as if English were a tonal language, like Mandarin. “If you are going to L.A., then in the half day, about lunchtime, you will be on *your bus*. To L.A. OK?”

Tse, who came to San Francisco 30 years ago, wore smart sunglasses and a long-sleeved striped shirt over





At the Tanger outlets in Barstow, California, tour bus riders and roadtrippers flock to buy items at stores like Claire's and Coach. At the Sunglass Hut, where Henry Lu peers into the mirror, far left, about 70 percent of their paying customers arrive via Asian tour buses.

jeans, his short black hair combed neatly back. He entertained in two languages, Mandarin and English, although the latter had but a tiny audience: A family of three from India, Warren, and me. Nguyen's family and a hip-looking couple from South Korea, Park Young-Gu, 40, and his wife, Zo Sun-Hwa, 39, understood Tse's English little better than his Mandarin.

That never stopped Tse from ribbing Park and Zo, almost constantly, with stereotypes that would make a sensitive American blanch. "Kimchi! Hyundai! Samsung!" he would shout at them, explaining how Koreans and Chinese "all used to be one big family," which is why Koreans can still read Chinese letters even if they don't understand a word of Mandarin.

"Today we go to the factory outlet," Tse announced from his perch at the front of the bus, microphone in hand. "The ladies will love it. Especially the Korean." He stared directly at Park and Zo, seated near the front of the bus. "Korean, crazy shoppers! But first we stop for lunch. I don't think we can find Korean barbecue, sorry. No kimchi!" I looked over warily at Park and Zo. They were in hysterics, and I came to see Tse's razzing as a sign of affection. If without a common language, they could still nod and wink at their own comic assumptions, then they could all unite as Asian and be counted among Tse's fold. Zo and Park delighted in his solicitousness.

Our bus would be traveling through the Central Valley to Barstow, California; then the next day to Death Valley to see the lowest spot in the contiguous 48 states at Badwater. On the third day, we would arrive in Las Vegas, where, for an additional fee, we could board one of two buses to the Grand Canyon — a four-hour trip to spend one hour at the South Rim, or a two-and-a-half hour drive to the Hualapai Nation's West Rim where we'd stay for a luxurious four hours. All of it would happen in three days.

"We always try to provide as much of a program as we can in 12 hours, even if we have to skip a restroom stop and have no time for lunch," said Tse, who used the pronoun "we" when speaking for both Americans and Chinese. "This is the way we prefer to do it. We don't want to finish a national park in one day. We want to finish a national park in a half day, or one hour. You can look at the itinerary of our Grand Circle tour. In seven days, we see the Petrified Forest, the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, Arches National Park, Bryce Canyon, Zion National Park, Antelope Canyon, Lake Powell."

"Five days," corrected our bus driver, Dale Marljar. "One day to drive out, one day to drive back."

"Okay, five days! It is impossible," Tse said. "But the Asian market, that's what they want. Up at 6 a.m., no breakfast. Rush, rush, rush. Then they come home and people say, 'What



GOOGLE MAPS AND THE NOUN PROJECT

did you see?' They say, 'I don't know! I forgot!'

"That's why," he chuckled, "they take so many pictures."

WE CROSSED FROM THE COAST INTO CENTRAL CALIFORNIA and headed down Interstate 5, past infinite groves of blooming almond trees. I looked back through the bus full of passengers; everyone was sleeping. As the scenery grew ever more dreary with monoculture orchards — grapes, olives, oranges, oranges — even Tse retreated to the back of the bus for a snooze. Later, crossing the soft green Tehachapi Mountains into the Mojave Desert, he perked up to narrate again: weather, geography, how deserts form in the rain shadows of mountains. He explained that space shuttles launched from the Mojave's Edwards Air Force Base, "because the weather here is perfect, never raining."

We got to the wind-scoured, dust-battered Mojave Desert city of Barstow at 5 p.m. as promised, to shop at the Tanger Outlet Mall. I rushed off the bus to find out which store would be the one all Chinese people love. Coach? Ralph Lauren? Ugg? To my disappointment, however, they didn't crowd into one store. Instead, they dispersed, like a vapor, absorbed into the retail miasma that had settled over the desert. I sat outside on a bench, watching Marljar and his fellow bus drivers clean yellow bug splatter off their enormous windshields.

I had expected to report that people returned an hour later loaded up with bags of shoes, clothing and other items to be repatriated back to their country of manufacture. But they did

Tour guide Raymond Tse, facing page, cracks a joke as he rattles off the itinerary for the trip.



“This is the way we prefer to do it. We don’t want to finish a national park in one day. We want to finish a national park in a half day, or one hour.”

Lassen tour guide
Raymond Tse
(pictured at right)

not. A 20-year-old engineering student from Taiwan, Henry Lu — whom photographer and now collaborator, Warren, had unearthed from the crowd as a rare English speaker — bought a new pair of sunglasses. Lili Liu acquired a handbag from Coach. Most people returned to the bus early.

My bus mates’ frugality notwithstanding, Barstow, a cheerless city that exists where the old Route 66 and the railroads converge, has been carefully calibrated to the needs of the Chinese shopping tourist. The Ramada Inn smoothly processes tour bus arrivals and features a restaurant in the parking lot called, simply, China Town Buffet. When we first pulled up, the restaurant looked dark and deserted, but later it lumbered into action like a powerful, efficient feeding machine. The lights flickered on; steam coated the windows. Inside, two long lines of stainless steel chafing dishes were being loaded with food.

Everyone arrived at once. We each paid \$10 and got a plate on which to pile mussels, shrimp, green beans, pork dumplings, mixed vegetables, egg rolls, sesame balls, rice, and several kinds of noodles. Everyone joyously elbowed up to the dish they wanted, pushing without a hint of enmity. I had learned to pronounce the sounds *dui-bu-qi*; once when I blurted them out, Henry Lu’s mother turned around and beamed, “Excuse me!” But the phrase turned out to be mostly irrelevant; no one cared who shouldered whom aside to grab a serving spoon. We sat at long family-style tables and ate as one, washing it all down with tea or Coca-Cola or Tsing-Tao beer. Sometime in the middle of the meal, two young local women walked in, their hair dyed blond with streaks of pink and blue. They surveyed the scene for a few minutes from the doorway, turned away and left.

The next morning, I peered into the windows of China Town Buffet. It looked clean, unoccupied, inert, as if it had been conjured up the night before only to evaporate when its patrons moved on. As if only when another series of tour buses returns from the Tanger Outlet tomorrow night would it rise up, serve, and then vanish again, like a Mandarin Brigadoon.

TELESCOPE PEAK, at 11,000 feet the highest point of the Panamint Range, rises up to the west, covered with snow, as we descend into the Badwater Basin. It was hard to know if everyone was looking out the window to drink in the spectacular beauty of the painted mountains, or staring at the horizon in order not to vomit; the bus listed and floated down the mountain like a sailboat crossing rolling swells. A long white salt flat gleamed in the sun.

“Baaaaad-WATER!” Tse declared, counting the feet as we descended below sea level. “Two hundred ten, two hundred twenty.” He described the ocean that once filled this valley, told of temperature extremes in the summer that will kill you

if you’re not careful. “But not today. Today nobody will die. Today we have only 65 degrees Fahrenheit. That’s 65 minus 32, which is 23; 23 divided by 9, which is 2.5; 2.5 times 5, which is *craaaay-zee!* OK, everybody, I don’t understand how America is still using Fahrenheit.”

He pointed to a sign on the bluff over the salt flats. “Sea level. See? That is the line. I went up last night, put that sign up there for *you*.”

“This,” he says, “is Essential California.”

We pulled up behind three other tour buses along the road. We joined the scattering of visitors wandering out on the salt pan, reading the interpretative signs, taking pictures. People from our bus forced their cameras into my hands, pointing to themselves and each other, then pointing to me, miming a shutter squeeze. I nodded and smiled, focused their cameras and took their pictures, raising a finger before they dispersed to say, “Wait! One more.”

In the line for the pit-toilet bathroom, a tall Asian man dressed in jeans and a pressed Oxford shirt came up behind me and asked to go first: He’d been on another bus, holding it for an hour. When he emerged, he told me his name, Xu Cho, and said he was living in San Jose, working as a software engineer at Samsung. He had come to the U.S. 20 years ago, when he was 25, and had lived all over the West. He ended up on a Lassen tour because his sister, visiting from Shanghai, got fed up with him working during his family’s visit and booked a trip for herself, their parents and Xu’s wife without bothering to consult him. “I should have rented a car to drive them,” he said, “but my sister beat me to it.”

And yet he admitted there were advantages to the bus tour: You never have to worry about getting stranded in the desert with a broken-down car; no one micromanages your driving. His bus was spacious and not even close to full, and it was bringing him and his family to places where they rarely felt the crush of a crowd. China is beautiful, he told me; it has its own breathtaking views, high mountains and waterfalls. One-fifth of China’s territory remains uninhabited by humans, and China has its own national parks — 225 of them, to be exact. But “whenever there is a national holiday, every tour is full,” Xu said. “The trains, the cars, the airplanes, the hotels — everything is booked.

“You are not going out into nature at those places. You are going into the crowd.

“Here,” he said, “look!” He spread his arms wide. “So much room. It is hard to get to anyplace in China where you can go like this.”

“Not even the Great Wall?” I asked.

“Especially not the Great Wall.”



David Sun, 14, far left, stares at a free fountain show in Las Vegas, where hordes of spectators watched through phone screens as they recorded the spectacle. Lili Liu, center, has her picture taken in Caesar's Palace. Raymond Tse, left, tells 10-year-old Leo Liu Jun to sit up straight while playing video games as they wait for the tour group to reconvene in the Venetian.

WE ARRIVED IN LAS VEGAS on the eve of the Lunar New Year. City billboards beamed welcomes in Chinese lettering, gift shops touted special sales celebrating the Year of the Ram, or the Goat, or — if, like us, you'd just come from Death Valley — the Year of the Bighorn Sheep.

Vegas hotels have dedicated bus areas, with driveways to smooth cumbersome steering ratios and obviate the dangers of driving in reverse. Our hotel, the 4,000-room, Medieval-themed Excalibur, had a rotunda specially designed for large arrivals. Our keys appeared in an instant, and we filtered out like invading mice through the *ding-ding-deeduly-ding-ing* of slot machines and a haze of cigarette smoke wafting from strategically placed bars, to elevators that would lift us with the silky speed of pneumatic tubes to our precipitous rooms.

Those of us who had bought \$25 tickets to a city tour assembled in the lobby at 4:30 p.m. to board the bus, which deposited us a few hotels away at Caesar's Palace. We were a mish mash of travelers who had come on different buses from various locales; I recognized only Henry Lu and his parents from our original group. In the mob gathered at Caesar's to watch an animatronic King Atlas dispatch his feuding children with a fire-breathing serpent, I met Nguyen Thi Ngoc Lien and her family, who had just arrived that day from Los Angeles. Together, we headed out onto the Strip: A pulsing, chattering juggernaut of humanity, impenetrable to flip-flopped bachelor partier and panhandling veteran alike. When two large white men in a pickup truck wanted to make a left turn through our fast-moving mass, they stooped low. "*Ebola! Ebola! Ebola!*" they shouted out the window. Our sea of people parted to let them through, less offended than stunned.

Elderly people, children, young adults, no one dallied or flagged. Tse had given out his cellphone number to rescue any strays, but as far as I know, no one used it. Everyone negotiated every move without incident. We walked and walked and walked. To the Mirage to see a simulated volcanic eruption, to the Bellagio to watch fountains dance to Frank Sinatra, to the Venetian, where a tall blond man who looked like a college basketball player directed, in faultless Mandarin, each person to a counter where, in exchange for their personal contact information, they were given a ceramic mug in the shape of a Venetian villa.

In the flicker of free time before loading up the bus to go to dinner, we lingered on the Venetian's second-floor balcony, listening to a string quartet play traditional Chinese music. By the time I climbed up there, Warren was already ensconced in the crowd camera in hand. "People are starting to speak English to us," she said, in a slightly amazed whisper, and introduced me to her new friend Sunflower Li, 40, from Guangzhou.

Li had her hair cut in a tight bob, which framed big eyes and full lips, and she spoke with pronounced confidence. "The song they are playing is called 'Two Butterflies Die for Love,'" Li explained. It tells the story of a boy butterfly who waits for a flower to open so he can declare his love for the girl butterfly inside it. When it does, he finds the girl butterfly, dead.

We followed Li and her young son and husband into the night, onto the bus, to the long strip mall that qualifies as Vegas' Chinatown. Tse escorted us into a second-floor Chinese restaurant, but just as quickly showed us out: The wait for food was averaging 45 minutes. He herded us all downstairs to a Taiwanese restaurant instead, where the ordering process involved peering at dishes behind a plate-glass display and then sitting down to order.

Warren and I were completely helpless here; Tse had to lead us like little children through the choices while Li ran interference with the wait staff. Finally, we were presented with a plate of pickled and steamed vegetables and a bowl of noodles to share. Tse thought we wouldn't finish a whole bowl each, but after watching Li's husband across the table slurping and biting off his noodles back into their broth, we realized we wanted our own. Li demanded a second. While a Chinese soap opera played on the overhead TV, all pink-and-green hues and histrionic gestures, and Li translated the story — "it's about a robber, and he is pleading forgiveness" — we watched, imitated, slurped, bit and drank our respective meals down to their dregs.

Both Warren and I had lived in other countries, places where we had learned the languages and tried our best to blend in with the locals. But our Chinese friends were having none of that. It occurred to us both in the same moment that we were not observing a troupe of Chinese visitors in the West attempting to adapt to our culture. We were traveling on a mobile China as it moved through the American West. And the American West was expanding — with restaurants, shopping and spectacles — to include them.

IN MAY OF 2013, CHINESE VICE PREMIER WANG YANG LAUNCHED A PUBLIC HARANGUE against badly behaved Chinese tourists. Enough with the loud talking, the nose-picking, the tagging of other country's artifacts, he said. Chinese travelers need to straighten up. The following October, China's National Tourism Administration published a 64-page *Guidebook for Civilized Tourism*. Among the advice: Wear a clean shirt, don't greet people by asking where they're going (as they do in China), and please don't slurp your noodles.

Noodle-slurping — a practice I wholeheartedly support — aside, I observed none of the forbidden behavior on Wang's list

While China has 225 national parks, during holidays, they're packed. "You are not going out into nature at those places. You are going into the crowd. Here, look! So much room."

—Xu Cho, San Jose software engineer

Li Qiang and Peng Lan watch a recording of the endless straight highway on Li's phone as the bus makes its way toward Death Valley.



“Who is a real Indian? I want to meet a real Indian!”

—A rare rude Mandarin-accented visitor at a gift shop on the Grand Canyon's West Rim

among my Chinese cohort. No rudeness, no slovenliness, no inappropriate shouting. I never heard a complaint nor heard of complaining; no one ever lost her temper, nor was anyone ever late. The people on my bus were unflaggingly cheerful, polite and generous; they evinced no cynicism about cheesy Vegas spectacles nor tedious landscapes nor California's flagrant water squandering. Only once did I see anyone behave with textbook insensitivity, when, in the gift shop at the Old West-themed Hualapai Ranch on the Grand Canyon's West Rim, a large man with a distinct Mandarin accent demanded to know if the young woman at the cash register was “a real Indian.” When she answered that she was in fact Mexican, the man persisted. “Who is a real Indian? I want to meet a real Indian!”

I followed the man out, hoping to get some insight into the nature of his inquiry, but I was waylaid by the chaps-clad jesters at the West Rim's Cowboy Village, who grabbed me and threatened to throw me in their jail for wearing a striped shirt. (Now *that*, I thought, was rude.) But I suspected I already knew what he was after; Tse had talked about it on the bus. Ten thousand years ago, “during the glacier period,” as Tse put it, people from the distant Asian continent had trekked north to Siberia and crossed the iced-over Bering Strait to take up residence in North America. “The ones that stayed north, they are the *ess-kee-MOH*,” Tse said. The ones who moved on farther south, “those are the Native American Indians. Which you will meet today.”

Tse reported the Bering Land Bridge story as established fact, but in reality “Beringia” remains a theory, alternately proved and disproved whenever archaeologists dig up new remains and analyze ancient DNA. If such a migration did happen, most scholars agree, it wasn't 10,000, but 40,000 to 12,500 years ago. Still, Tse said, many Asian people delight in the notion that Native Americans might be their relatives.

I thought this might explain why the clientele at the Hualapai Nation's Grand Canyon West attractions is, by anecdotal estimates, 90 percent Chinese. A Native American tourist ambassador stationed at Eagle Point, Daniel Powskey, confirmed that Chinese visitors ask him a lot if he thinks the

Chinese and Native Americans are related. He also told me he doesn't particularly appreciate the question: “We have our own creation stories,” he said, “which say that we were put here at the beginning of the Earth.” He declined to tell me any of them because the February weather was spring-like, and the animals might hear.

Judging by the response to the story among my fellow bus travelers, however, Tse might have exaggerated the Beringia story's appeal. Only Sunflower Li allowed that “it matters a little bit, as a story.” No one else seemed to care. I was confident, at any rate, that Beringia was not what brought Chinese tourists to this side of the Grand Canyon in droves. Nor was it the story of the late David Jin, the Chinese-born Las Vegas businessman who collaborated with the Hualapai Nation to develop the Skywalk, the glass-bottomed platform that protrudes 70 feet out over the 4,000-foot abyss. Most of the Asian visitors I observed were happy to save the \$30 admission to the Skywalk and perch themselves, arms stretched wide, on rocks extending over the canyon, mimicking flight. They, like everyone on my bus, likely had one compelling reason for choosing the Hualapai Nation over the National Park Service's South Rim: The tribe's view of the Grand Canyon is a whole lot closer to Las Vegas.

And they came to the Grand Canyon, as Nguyen put it, to see “the power of water.” When we first arrived, I had boarded the small shuttle bus from the airport terminal to the Hualapai Ranch with Zo and Park, who sat quietly looking into the cellphones they used to help them interpret the sights. Nguyen had warned me that “Asians don't show emotion,” but as we rounded the corner to the Hualapai Ranch and the Big Ditch came into view, both Koreans rushed to the window and cried out, Samsungs in hand. Seeing it through their eyes, I did the same. We celebrated together by positioning ourselves, two by two, at the window with the landscape behind us, taking smiling pictures of each other in pairs. We were never able to exchange more than a few fought-for words, but in that moment, we were friends.

JOSHUA TREES IN BLOOM floated by the bus window on the way back to Vegas, each creamy tip fitting each branch like a neat little cap. Nguyen's husband, Tran Phuoc, asked me to write down the word for the plant on my notepad; then he looked it up in his handheld translating machine. "It's a name?" he asked. I told him yes, and explained that the Mormon settlers thought the Joshua tree's upturned limbs looked like a man praying, and so named the plant after the prophet.

I spoke clearly and slowly, never sure that he understood; the story comes so packed with bizarre details that making sense of it would take a month. Tran seemed satisfied enough, though. He handed me his business card, identifying him as the dean of a major engineering school in Ho Chi Minh City. "Come to visit us," he said. Then he switched places with Nguyen so he could nap next to his daughter.

Nguyen's English was halting and fragmented; our conversation felt like two people finding their way through a maze in the fog, feeling around for clues, heading down dead-ends for long minutes before realizing we'd taken a wrong turn. Still, it went fairly deep. We discussed her country's environmental troubles, cultural differences in childbearing, even the war the U.S. fought on her home soil. Unlike the Chinese with their expedited visa rules, Vietnamese travelers endure long waits; Nguyen's visa took two years, "because they thought I was going to come here to live with my sister." Then they looked at her passport and saw that she had been to Malaysia, Singapore, China. "They saw I was a traveler, and they said OK." But in all her travels she had never been anywhere, she said, where the horizon stretched out so unbroken.

"We have some open space, some parks," she said. "But they are all very small. This," she said, gesturing to the window and the miles of uninterrupted land beyond it, "it makes you feel different. So good. So much room."

We parted in the Excalibur's rotunda; I thanked her again for clearing my headache, and resolved to stay in touch. I



caught up with Sunflower Li and her family as they were heading back to the elevators, looking tired and not at all interested in navigating a second language. I said goodbye to Tse, and thanked him for his help. Then I headed to the most American bar I could find, to have the most American of drinks: A rich, cold, hoppy beer. Then a few sips into my IPA at the MGM Grand's TAP Sports Bar, it dawned on me what I was drinking: A brew the 19th-century British had formulated with preservative hops for export to India.

We live in a global village, I thought, and there is no way out. Nor, I realized, do I want there to be. ■

A Lassen Tours bus driver cleans his windshield after a day driving across California.

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The guide inside

BY ERICA BERRY - WINNER

Anna's braces fell off after breakfast on the fifth day. I was rolling my rain-jacket into my backpack when she came up to me, clutching them in her rosy palm — tiny metal pieces that had once been on her tiny ivory teeth. "Cricket," she said, "they've been loose for a while. I think we need to call my dentist." Part of the chain was still in her mouth, and she cocked her head at me, smiling through wire and chapped lips, her cheeks a sunburned topography of mosquito bites.

We were deep in the Centennial Mountains of Montana — Indian paintbrush meadows, alpine streams — and nothing made sense. My camp name, Cricket, was also the name of the miniature Australian shepherd my parents owned back home. That morning, I'd woken up clutching my bear spray like a talisman, sweat-drenched in the mesh cave of my tent. My co-guide had left on horseback around 4 a.m., evacuating the ever-vomiting Mary. We were hoping it wasn't Hantavirus: There were mouse droppings in the cowboy yurt we had cooked in a day before.



I was facing a world where 13 12- and 13- and 14-year-old girls were chirping my dog's name, looking for me, and I had to respond with a smile. The previous night, after stringing up bear bags of lotion, tampons, pots, granola and trash in the trees, I let myself cry. I was 19. I had signed myself up for both motherhood and the wilderness, and I wasn't sure I could handle either.

A pair of alien hands rummaged through my pack: Dirty fingernails, swollen knuckles, bug-bitten palms, branch-scratched wrists, a rainbow of friendship bracelets. I put Anna's braces in a Ziploc bag, telling her we would sort it out when we got back to the van. Her eyes were wet. I told her I had once accidentally thrown my retainer into the trash with a paper plate, and it required a dive through a dumpsterful of crusts and cores to recover it. "Just think, this will be a great story one day!" I told her. She laughed.

Ahead of me, 24 eyes peered through pine needles and sunlight. The girls were grinning, kicking their feet like horses in the trail.

"All ready, crew?" said a strange, strong voice from inside my ribs.

"Come on, Cricket," said Astrid. "We're following you!" ■

Readers' foreign travel tales

We asked our intrepid readers to send us stories about ways the West can feel foreign. What follows are the editors' picks.

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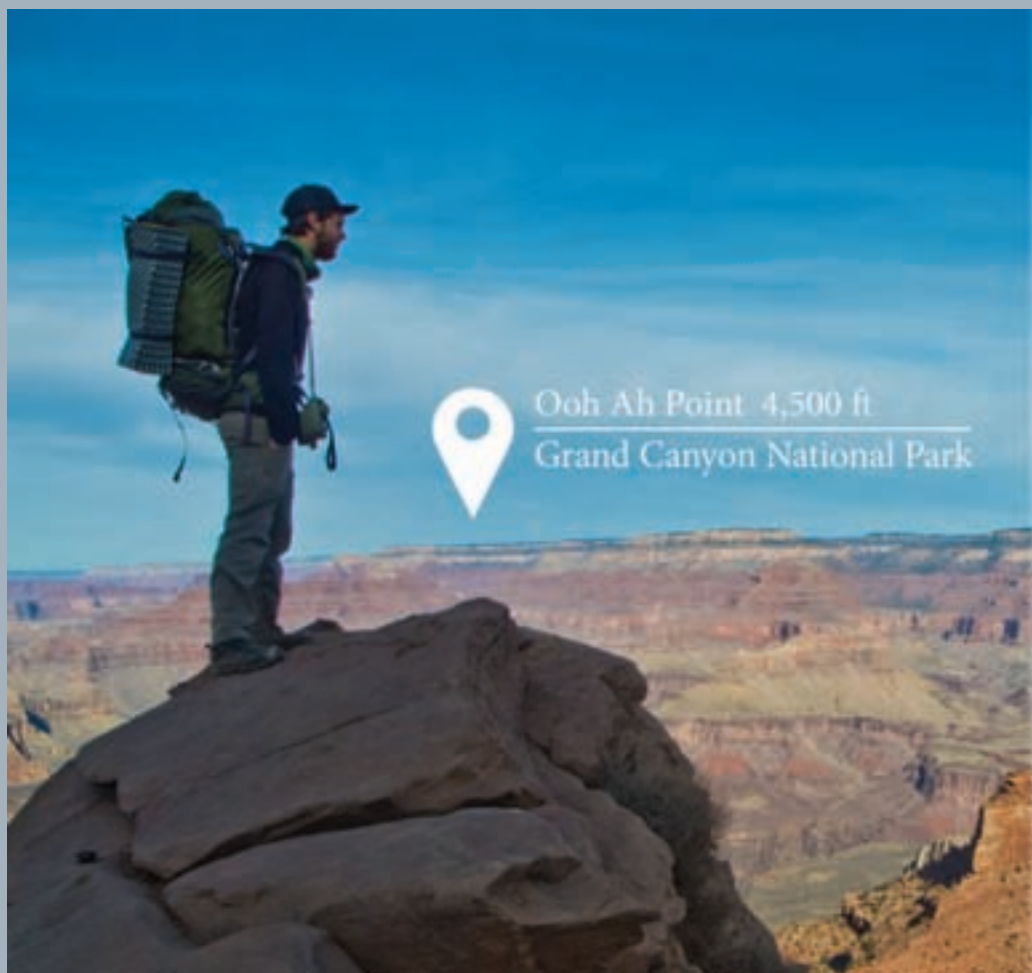


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Land of retirement

BY RALPH MOORE

Nothing I could relate to; no tracks that meant anything. A wilderness for sure. Directed by colors — the piercing blue overhead brilliant and uplifting; the baked cinnamon sandstone varnished, solid and comforting — I found all the crayon shades between red and brown, hovering this morning near burnt umber. Early signs led only to box canyons, an occasional wash. Nothing that matched the guidebook's description beyond the trailhead, nothing recognizable. No cairns. Where were the familiar patterns, the landmarks? It hit me then, like late afternoon thirst on an all-day hike: I was in this for the long haul.

I was retired. I was retired, and there had to be an app for that. It was definitely the most foreign place imaginable. I needed reference points, and sought understanding through observation, conversation and writing. I looked for plants and people to relate to, yearned for weather to connect with, and sought prepositions that wouldn't end phrases. I came to this place by traveling, exploring and education, balanced with living and working in 10 Western states over 40 years, mostly through a career in land management. My wife and I fell for the expansive prairie in Nebraska's Panhandle, the spring snow in the Sierra high country, the rich distinctive smells of evergreens in the Pacific Northwest and the waves along the West Coast. Alaska will be with us always. Generous and gracious hearts opened up through stories, setting waypoints.

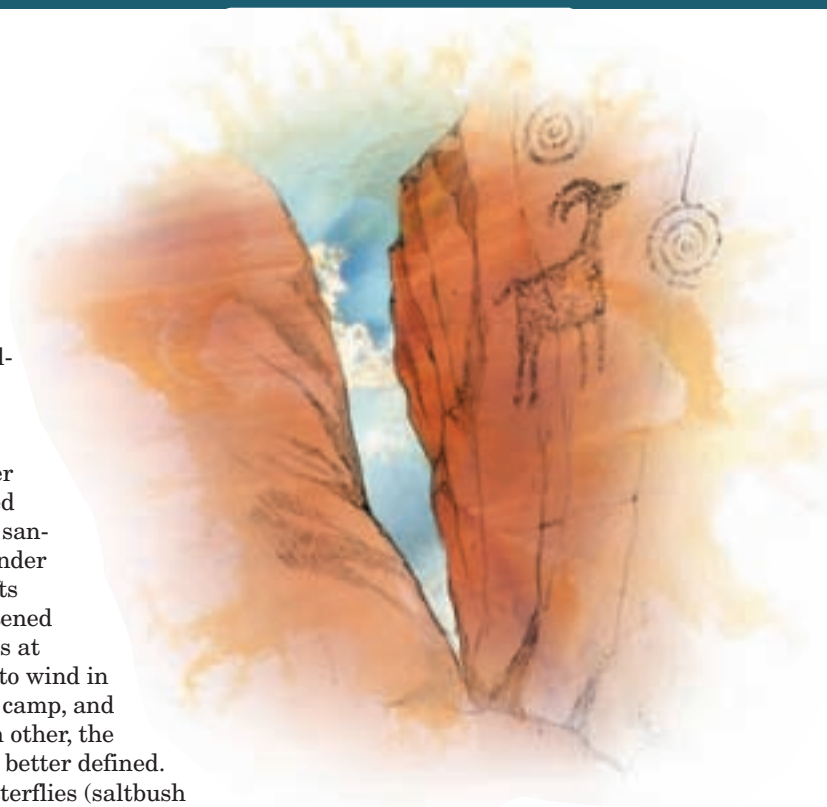
The Colorado Plateau is a powerful place, where return means reconnection. Yet this place where I now reside — "retirement" — is shaped as much by open space as time, with different currency and language — and it begs perspective. This landscape is our new home, yet those living here look vaguely

familiar.

Some- where in Desolation Canyon, or Still-water Canyon, or Labyrinth Canyon, as we floated day after day and laughed and listened to sandy water run under our drifting rafts and canoes, listened to canyon wrens at dawn, listened to wind in cottonwoods at camp, and listened to each other, the terrain became better defined.

I looked for butterflies (saltbush sootywing, sagebrush checkerspot, checkered skipper) and photographed spring wildflowers (desert phlox, scarlet gilia, globemallow, paintbrush). Identification, categorization, then realization. Become grounded by walking.

At the side canyon's junction with the river, a petroglyph. Where once prominent features defined a journey's course, I am learning the customs of this new place and looking, looking for nuances. ■



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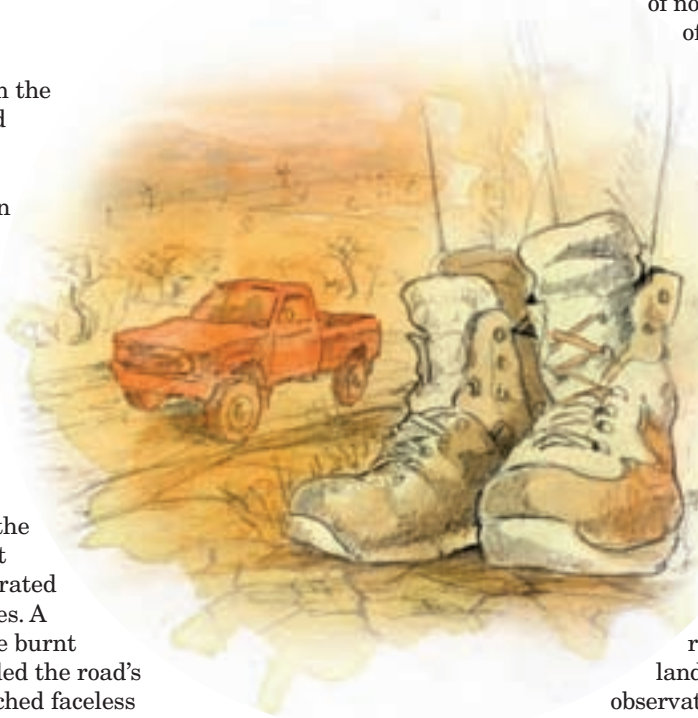
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Unfamiliar

BY VICTORIA STEIN

I don't feel at ease anywhere in the world. I'm the mixed-race child of immigrant families, almost blending in but never quite comfortable. Brown hair, brown eyes, average features: I can seem like a local anywhere I can act confident, and a stranger anywhere outside my comfort zone. But here in the Navajo Nation, as my boots hit the red soil beside our dirt-crusted car, I was confronted with an entirely new sense of foreignness.

Juniper and sage clung to the cracked ground, and the recent winter rain had already evaporated from pools between the cactuses. A truck, stained over years to the burnt copper color of the earth, avoided the road's worst potholes; the driver watched faceless through a dark window as my friend pushed open the sand-scoured gate to his grandmother's house. The truck disappeared down the hill in a cloud of dust, toward the old schoolhouse and the abandoned trading post, past a sign advertising a backyard sheep roast, \$5 per plate. The engine noise faded, muted against the flat sky, as my friend bounded ahead into the



empty house. I lingered at the gate.

To me, this homestead did not evoke a sense of nostalgic love, no wistful remembrance of a golden childhood. It was sharp and cold, bare and beautiful, striations in canyon walls and branching brittle vegetation — visually similar to the high deserts I've known; politically isolated from the nation I belonged to, which enclosed this one. To him, even though the light was falling, the house was cold, and the water wouldn't run from the taps, this place mattered: It was where his bones rested. I learned a lot over our days in that house with its family photos, cast-iron pans seasoned by generations, paintings and knickknacks, and backyard full of forgotten tools.

His uncle came to fix the water, but I never saw him — another ghostly reminder to me that the real life of the land continued around my bubble of quiet observation.

We stood looking down steep steps, laid for his great-grandmother by her husband to lead her, stone by stone, to the ancient peach orchard at the canyon bottom. I fell in love with that story, with the red grit in my teeth, with the tiny trickle far below that wound past the dry-leafed trees and became, in time, the Colorado River. But I wasn't at home. ■

Here in the Navajo Nation, as my boots hit the red soil beside our dirt-crusted car, I was confronted with an entirely new sense of foreignness.



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Uranium bust

BY IRINA ZHOVOROV

Three bars used to serve beer in Jeffrey City — one for the oilfield workers, one for the uranium miners, and one for the ranchers. Now there's one, and when I walk in a group of smokers sits at a round table playing card games on their computers. The barkeep, Vikki, is also the town's part-time librarian. Why are there metal grates on the windows? I ask. The women kept getting into fights and throwing each other through the windows, she says. This is the ranchers' bar, serving the approximately 75 people who remain here. The other workers have left.

The town hugs U.S. 287, but down the dirt roads that weave through sagebrush there are still ranches, still signs of life. I visit a rancher who tells me Jeffrey City used to have 5,000 residents. There were social clubs, schools, even a swimming pool. Later, a squatter was found dead in the emptied pool. The second hand of the clock in her wallpapered kitchen thunders above the rancher's quiet recollections of community bustle.

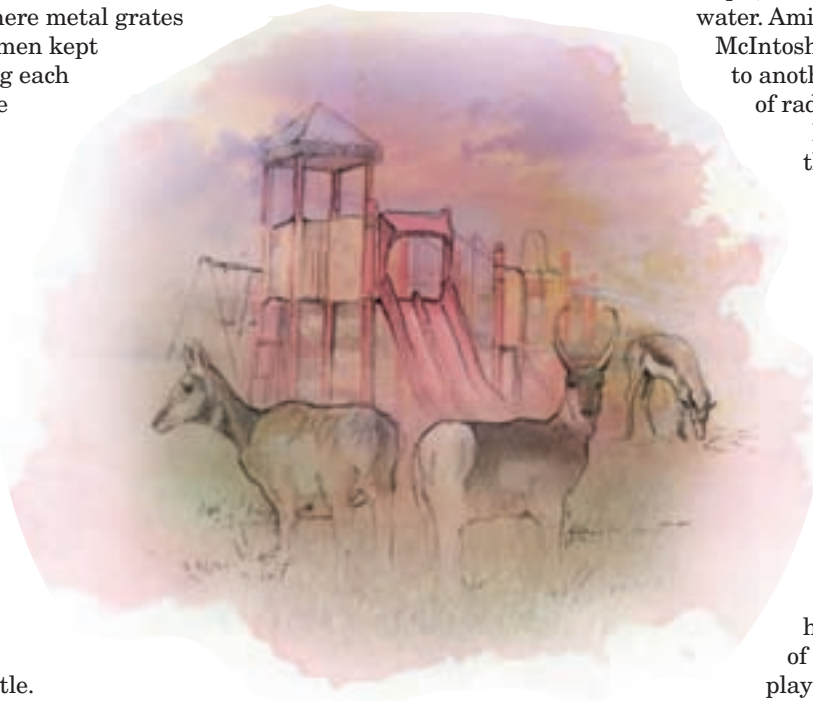
Maybe they'll come back, she says. I ask if she'd like that, and she says, Sure, those were good times.

Uranium is expected to boom again, and men in polished white trucks have been frequenting the hidden hills around Jeffrey City. They leave the keys to gated mine sites with Vikki between visits. I go out with Frank, who's preparing the mine for opening, once uranium prices rise sufficiently. I carry a Geiger counter and point it at mounds of dirt piled up by the previous boom. It chirps enthusiastically. Frank takes me to an old mine pit, now filled with brilliant blue

water. Amid the tans of the plains, the McIntosh Pit's deep cyan is a portal to another world. The water is full of radionuclides.

Back at the bar, I meet the Mad Potter and lose \$2 playing dice. He makes ceramics in a small complex of structures across from the bar. It looks like he ended up here after breaking down on the way to Burning Man. Stop by anytime, he says as I head out. I pull out of the bar and onto U.S. 287, onward to my destination. Before I speed up, I roll slowly past rows of boarded-up company housing for miners. A herd of antelope grazes on the playground. ■

Why are there metal grates on the windows? The women kept getting into fights and throwing each other through the windows.



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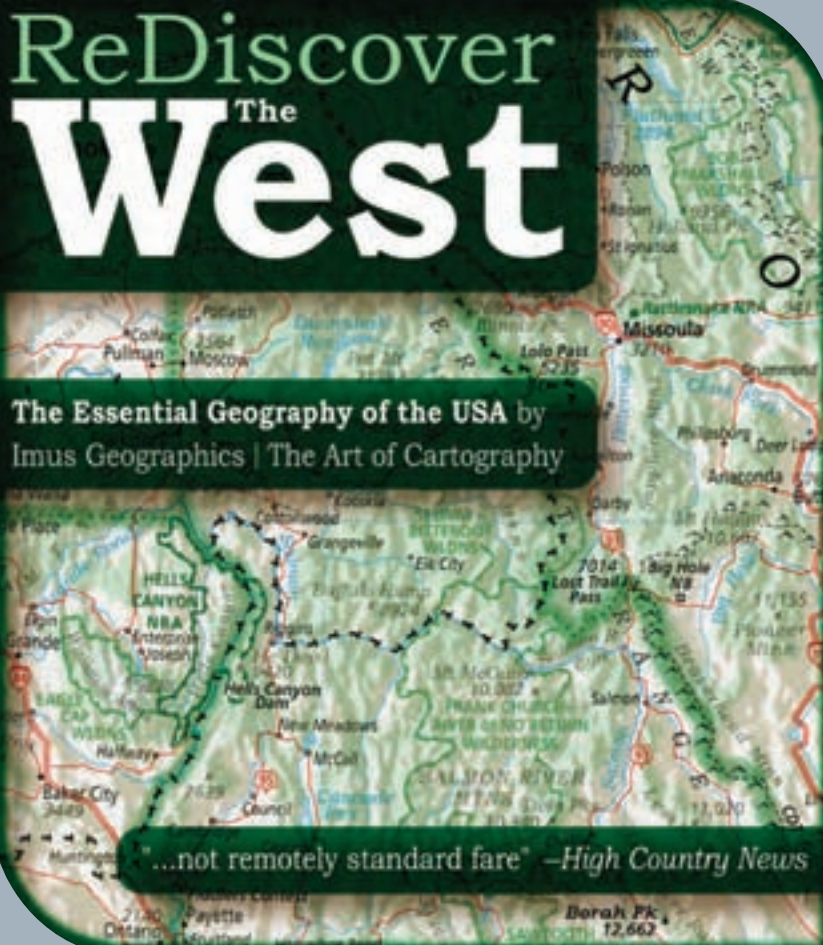
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Cola hole

BY STEVE SNYDER

I had had a long but enjoyable day of hiking. Most of my treks had been relatively easy, and of course, beautiful, ever since that first morning barefoot walk in the sand at Nickel Beach after unpacking my tent and sleeping bag. Walks through cathedral groves of redwood giants had me wondering if I had seen the tallest tree; it was one of them, though left deliberately unmarked.

It was more than sky-high gazes. Noticing the difference in bark from tree to tree, looking at the luxuriant undergrowth, and appreciating another cathedral-like aspect — quiet, oh-so-rare today — completed the day.

But I eventually headed back to my car. It was time to wrap up this segment of my vacation and ease on down the road, and I didn't want to rush.

And that's when I found out the beauty of nature had been rudely punctuated by a small-scale human horror show. Or so it seemed to me.

Because the land, or at least some of its more prominent



merchants, had turned its back on Atlanta. *There was no Coca-Cola available.* Georgia's most famous product, in its most convenient form, was nowhere to be found here.

Not a single convenience store in Crescent City deigned to carry it on tap, instead offering only a sticky, toothlessly sweet tar called "Pepsi."

I had heard tales of this strange phenomenon before. I knew that large swaths of the Pacific Northwest were deep into Coke Denialism.

But I had never met this scourge face-to-face before. Until now. Heartless, remorseless, pitiless fountain machines confronted me.

I needed to gas up, then visit the pier area at sunset before I bid adieu to the southern gateway to Redwood National Park. So after visiting every C-store on Highway 101, I finally settled for a non-cola product from a fountain machine.

The forces of evil, lurking in the middle of stunning beauty, would not win. The setting sun might bring on natural nightfall, but human darkness would not conquer my soul.

Lost Coast, here I come! ■

That's when I found out the beauty of nature had been rudely punctuated by a small-scale human horror show.



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What goes up

BY STEPHEN ELLIOTT

The last thing you want to hear when your life is in someone else's hands is, "Oh, shit."

Yet there I was, 80 feet above the Teton County, Idaho, fairgrounds and the neighboring industrial lockup, in a hot air balloon, listening to Earl the pilot repeatedly mumble, "Oh, shit."

Hot air ballooning is about the most foreign type of travel I can imagine — untethered from solid ground yet unsupported by jet engines or safety harnesses ... just a wicker basket, some steel cables and a gruff, leathery old man preventing you from falling to a potato field 100 or 1,000 feet below.

And I believed that Earl would keep me safe. He was wearing a *cowboy hat*, for Christ's sake! He'd been flying balloons for damn near three decades! And not one accident! You had me at howdy, Earl.

We took off around 6 a.m., with the sun just above the Tetons shining straight ahead. The oh-shits began about 30 seconds and 80 vertical feet later. Earl noticed that one of the four cables connecting the corners of the basket to the balloon was not, in fact, connecting the basket to the balloon, but rather dangling unattached and unhelpful, one corner of our chariot



hanging dangerously below the other three.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit," Earl said, neither shouting nor whispering. He quickly yanked the cord to release air from the balloon so we could descend, but in his panic he let out too much. After a brief leveling off, we began falling faster and faster, toward a warehouse and industrial enclosure next to the fairgrounds.

We skimmed the warehouse roof, then hopped down into the gravel piles in the yard. I braced for impact, which was jarring and immediate.

Flight is foreign. It's unnatural for humans to have their feet on anything but earth, yet the frequency and regularity of air travel has made flight seem boring and routine. Air travel is so safe and normal that I forget I'm 30,000 feet in the air; instead, I worry about legroom and not spilling my ginger ale.

It took a return to the oldest form of human flight (France, 1783) to remind me that man belongs on the ground, no matter how liberating it is to ignore the laws of physics. What goes up must come down. I felt more foreign 80 feet above the Teton County Fairgrounds than I do 30,000 feet above middle America. Go figure. ■

I believed that Earl would keep me safe. He was wearing a cowboy hat, for Christ's sake!

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Children in Barbaric Country

In the glacial enclave of Whittier, Alaska, the man who rents sea kayaks asked the three dads in our group to step into his boatshed. A broad-shouldered man, middle-aged like the rest of us, he leaned against his desk in the corner of the room. “As a father, I’m appealing to you,” he said. “You should rethink your plans.”

We were about to set off on a nine-day expedition with seven adults and five children into the wilderness islands of Prince William Sound, a country of dark, mountainous forests and vast glaciers unloading into the sea where icebergs ground on rocky shores.

“I won’t turn business away,” the man continued. “You can do whatever you want, but this looks like a mistake waiting to happen.”

It was the ratio that worried him: too many kids, not enough grown-ups. When he sent out children, it was usually one or two in a clump of athletic, keenly dressed outdoor folk. We looked more like a tribe. I’d come with my two boys, aged 6 and 10. Steve, a gray and grizzled orchard farmer from western Colorado, had a 10-year-old girl and 12-year-old boy. And Irvin, a Filipino-American Forest Service biologist and wildland firefighter from Southern California, was a solo dad with a 4-year-old bruiser of a son. Irvin and I had both worked as backcountry guides and trained in emergency medicine, and Steve had the skills and demeanor of an Eagle Scout.

We’d be fine, we assured the man. “Have you ever seen a kid die from hypothermia?” he responded. None of us had. Steve shook his head. “I’d rather not,” he said.

What we were planning was different from any of our adventures in the Lower 48, the boatman warned, the consequences more immediate. Little bodies can lose heat fast when dumped in icy Alaskan waters. But we weren’t planning to island-hop, racing through a guidebook as if to a finish line, we explained. We’d be slower, more methodical, careful. We wanted to get to know the geography of just one sheltered corner of the sound, spending more time on foot than in kayaks.

The boatman seemed unconvinced. “Are you outfitted for bears?” he asked.

Steve gave a slow nod. “We’ve got it as covered as we’re going to,” he said.

OF COURSE, THERE ARE RISKS involved when you take children into deep wilderness. I’d seen enough fresh kills in bear country to know what happens to small, fragile prey. We had a good plan, though. Put the right group of people together, with a good mix of skills and personalities, and you could do damn near anything with kids. Throw in a radio to hail a passing boat in an emergency, and at least one firearm (ours was a .357 magnum, not the best for bears, but better than sticks and stones), and you have yourself a family adventure in the bush.



Father and son, facing page, return from checking the shrimp pot. Top, Will, almost 12, gathers clams in the midnight dusk of South-Central Alaska. Above, the annelid worm Will wanted to put down his sister’s shirt.

“It’s not that I don’t want to be here, I do,” she said. “But you’ve interfered with my life.”

It’s better than leaving the children behind. Whenever I traveled in Alaska without my two young boys, I never heard the end of it. My youngest, even when he was 3, would be outraged. How could I leave them at home for this one? What kind of parent was I trying to be? My job was to bring them inside my life, guiding them through the rooms of my own landscape. They didn’t have to know the weight of my concern for their welfare. Our task as adults was to bring them here and get them out alive.

And so we set out. Smacking waves for three hours in a steel boat, we wound between islands, cathedrals of mountains and glaciers passing around us. When the boat nosed into the cove on a small, anonymous island about 60 miles from Whittier, we leaned over the edges looking down into clear water, rocks armed with starfish. Wearing knee-high mud boots, I jumped in with Will, Steve’s 12-year-old son, and we ducked through the alders, checking for high tidelines and clearings big enough to camp in. Will was ready for adventure. He would be our fire starter with his new knife, a magnesium fire-starter rod, and some dryer lint brought from home. His dad had given him four dry matches to last the entire trip.

We found a clearing, then circled back to each other on a swift scouting mission. “This look good to you?” I asked. The straggle-haired boy nodded eagerly: “Yeah.”

We unloaded our full complement on the shaggy shores of the cove. Then the boat left us, to return in nine days. By late afternoon, we had two camps set up. One was for the kitchen (and the bears, if they wanted it), the other held our tents and our children, who’d be sighing in their sleep.

In the long, warm light of July, Will’s 10-year-old sister, Adair, plopped down on a rock outcrop beside our saltwater cove. The smell of the outgoing tide mixed with moss and spruce duff, and the younger children squealed and splashed in the tidal pools.

Adair set out her colored pencils on the dark, iron-hard rock: blue, orange, red and purple. With a sketchbook open in her lap, she began drawing flowers. A silky-headed seal popped up in the cove, studied her a few moments, then slipped underwater with hardly a ripple.

Adair flicked between pencils, flopping her black rubber boots back and forth. “I don’t really have a good pink,” she said, half to herself, half to me. “Isn’t this just a crazy world?”

It was my fault she was missing a state gymnastic meet and a friend’s water-park birthday party back in Colorado. She blamed me; I’d come up with this stupid Alaska plan and wrecked her schedule. “It’s not that I don’t want to be here, I do,” she said. “But you’ve interfered with my life.”

Adair grew up on a farm and had seen all manner of life and death. She was comfortable in nature, would be the first to plunge her hands fearlessly into a slick nest of seaweed, placing limpets at the tips of her 10 outstretched fingers. But she was outside her comfort zone in deeper wilderness than she’d ever seen.

She was drawing cosmos flowers, the kind that grew in her mother’s terra-cotta pots back home. She said she didn’t think cosmos grew in Alaska. “I wish we had a better way to communicate,” she told me as she continued drawing. “What if one of us gets hurt? How can we get to civilization? I don’t know what would happen if one of us slipped on these rocks and broke a bone. What happens if there’s a bear attack? What if we don’t know what to do?”

“You’re with good people,” I said. “I’m not worried.”

Adair stopped drawing for a moment and looked at me over the top of her notebook, unimpressed.



BACK AT HOME, it’s dishes and books, toys on the floor and ... *who broke this?... or that?* You can afford to take your kids’ wellbeing for granted for longer chunks of time. Out here, you or someone you profoundly trust has to know where they are at every moment. In the wilderness, the image of them burns deeper into your mind, their every gesture magnified, every leap and shriek, every strike of knife on flint, every drawing of a wildflower.

On the third day, we explored the southern perimeter of our small island by water, paddling around coves and gray bedrock shoals. As our gaggle of sea kayaks moved a quarter mile into open water, a humpback whale spouted to our left. “Look!” I told Jasper, my 10-year-old, who sat in the front of the kayak letting his paddle drag lightly in the water, looking down into the fathomless vaults of Prince William Sound.

He looked up in time to see the whale slide back under, its fluke last to go. Low storm clouds bruised the sky. For a minute, we stared into water and clouds, the same shape and color, no real sense of up or down but for the sporadic islands. When nothing else happened, Jasper returned to the study of his paddle blade in the water, captivated by its ripples.

I kept watch, and when a second spout appeared, I shouted again. The whale was about a hundred feet to our left. Spray rose 40 feet in the air and curled into mist followed by a great, windy inhalation, as the whale turned for its next dive. An obsidian-green spine slid into the water followed by flukes flipping upward, casting off a rain of seawater. Jasper said, “Did it go under us?” I said it must have.

The boy watched the whale dive again, its fluke lifting and then sliding beneath the surface. When it disappeared, Jasper touched his paddle to the water, as if a whale were no more exciting than the small roller-coaster ripples he was making, all sense of

scale thrown to the wind.

A FEW DAYS IN, we ran out of juice boxes. Then candy bars became scarce. My wife stood over the cooler and, without looking directly at anyone, said to the forest, to the seawater cove, “Where are the rest of the snacks, you guys?”

She meant two of the dads: Irvin and me. We had flown in a day early to hit the grocery stores in Anchorage. We’d gotten a lot of grains and nuts and cheap cases of Indian food packets. But in the rush and jet lag, we’d neglected to do an accurate snack assessment. *Snacks* — appetite suppressants and mood enhancers for kids. Without enough snacks, our foodstuffs were being depleted faster than planned.

Becky, the orchard mom, a slight and brazen woman with sturdy hands and a big, open laugh, nodded slowly, as if surprised the discovery had taken this long. “Maybe we should add up what we’ve got left,” she said.

By *we*, Becky meant the women: the two moms and our friend Bethany. Bethany had come with her boyfriend, a street cop from Denver who carried the .357, every member an invaluable part of the tribe. She and Becky sat down with a notebook and began calling out orders, making the rest of us dig through boxes and metal-lined dry-bags to figure out what we had left. Using the notebook, they planned each meal. Irvin and I had not thought to do this. We’d flown by the seat of our pants, apparently too much.

I USED TO TAKE KIDS INTO THE WILDERNESS as a hired guide. The expeditions ranged from a few days to a couple weeks. Most often, this was in the desert. I loaded up on supplies in Yuma, Arizona, and hauled unsuspecting high-schoolers into

landscapes of scorpions, tarantulas and cactus. A girl from Los Angeles saw a shooting star for the first time on one of these trips. We were in canoes along the lower Colorado River, on a night paddle, where we all tied up and leaned silently back, floating and watching the sky. When a meteorite skidded over us, just a little streak of light, the girl looked at me, her eyes excited and puzzled. She couldn't even form the question: *What was that?*

As parents, we have the chance to be ushers, opening a door into wilderness and watching as our children walk out into vast new worlds. In many ways, the kids are more open than we are, seamlessly moving into whatever comes next, Adair laying her colored pencils on the ground, studying flowers, Jasper gazing at the whale, equally entranced by the ripples from his paddle.

We did things with our kids that other parents would consider dirty or foolhardy or downright dangerous. But we believed that our kids should grow up in our lives, experience the world firsthand, get it all over their hands and faces — moss, wind, water and the shroud of the sky.

There were basic rules for the children: Never leave adult sight, always be with a buddy, inform us of every potty break. Each child carried a whistle, and the older ones had good knives.

Bears, though numerous in this part of the state, gradually became less of a concern. Given enough fish, coastal grizzlies can reach up to 1,400 pounds, but they tend to be less aggressive than inland bears; their life along narrow shorelines and crowded rivers forces them to become more social. Besides, our children made so much noise wherever they went, crashing through the woods, screaming at the tops of their lungs, that we figured all the bears on our island were huddled on the opposite end, with their paws covering their heads, wishing we'd leave. I'd been worried about bears and hypothermia, not so much about food. Perhaps I should have reconsidered my priorities back in Anchorage.

ON THE FIFTH NIGHT, near midnight, I sat at the edge of the kitchen tarp with Becky. Rain fell in the dusk light. The tent lights were out, the kids asleep. All the food that wasn't in bear boxes had been packed into bags and hung as high and intricately as possible. We had rigged a pulley system over a sturdy spruce, suspending about a hundred pounds of food 30 feet above the tidal flats. Becky and I had just finished cleaning up after the nightly rampage. We'd put away toothbrushes and picked up stray, damp articles of clothing, hanging them on guy-wires from the kitchen tarp.

Now, Becky sat on a cooler, whittling a stick into a pile of shavings. I asked what she thought about the gender roles we'd developed as wilderness parents. She took a breath, slivered off another curl, and told me it seemed clear that the women were planning the meals, doing most of the cooking, while the men were building fires and catching fish.

The mothers knew where each kid was at any moment, she said, and what they were doing, who was cold, who had spilled hot chocolate all over their pants, who couldn't find their socks. It didn't matter whose kids they were. "I think if we stayed here longer, our gender roles would evolve," she said. "We've got three strong, competent women who are probably just as happy fishing and paddling and lighting fires as, say, boiling 'Tasty Bites.'"

The women may have suspected that Irvin and I had intentionally shorted us on food. It's something he and I might have thought of; it gives you a reason to step up the foraging. Fishing lines were now constantly out, and we checked and moved a shrimp pot until we found the sweet spot. At dinner, kids proffered seaweed, collecting different species along the shore. They lightly toasted the preferred species of red-ribbon, *Palmaria hecatensis*, with olive oil, calling it sea bacon, making it on the stove until no one could eat anymore.

Every meal now included something recently alive: fried lingcod added to Kashmir spinach, the probing head of a prawn sticking like a radio antennae from a bowl of watery refried beans. We were gradually going primal. By breakfast on Day Six, the fathers and Will stood around a plastic bucket of



steamed clams, cracking them open and popping the morsels in our mouths like peanuts. The mothers stood back and watched, waiting for food poisoning.

Irvin was our marine specialist: He'd say yes to one thing, no to another. "Yes" to the many mollusks we were digging up; "No" to the two-foot-long annelid worm Will wanted to put down his sister's shirt.

By Day Nine, when the boat returned for us, we had explored most of the surrounding coves, and had even ventured to other islands and inlets. We knew our spread of resources. We still had some rice left and several packets of Indian food, and we probably could have survived happily for another week, even without juice boxes. Left out here long enough, we could have turned into Robinson Crusoe. (Or maybe *Lord of the Flies*.)

But it was time to leave; we were meant for the mainland. The boat arrived like a warship, prow driving up on shore to almost touch our kitchen. I felt like darting back into the woods, throwing rocks at it from the shadows, racing off to live with the bears, but the kids were already running up on deck. They were ready for the next adventure, whatever it might be, a whale, a ripple, a steel boat to carry us home. We loaded up and left our cove, turning back toward Whittier. The boat slapped over waves. Little heads fell into laps, the children lulled to sleep by the water, as the islands parted for our safe return. ■

Adair, 10, facing page, sports a limpet collection on her fingertips, the fleshy mollusks suctioned to her skin. Top, children play in a lily pad pond in the island interior; it was hard to convince them to climb out and continue exploring with the adults. Above, children fascinated by the smallest details in Prince William Sound.

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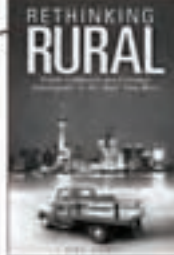
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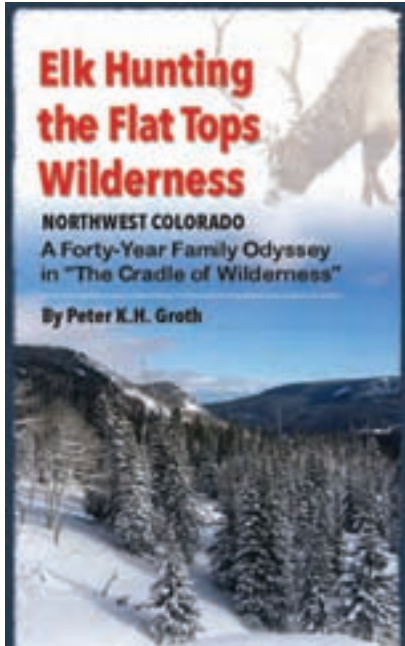
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My shattered, unquenchable romance with the West

The West is full of contradictions, and I am one of them. Cowboy hats now make me suspicious, especially in cities.

It must have started when I was seven. In a black-and-white photo taken for “Fasnacht” — South German Mardi Gras — I’m sporting a cowboy hat and have a bandana around my neck. This showed my fellow Germans that I was strong and courageous, close friends with the Indians. Their faraway home in the American West was exciting and sometimes dangerous, but I was never afraid because the good guys always won.

Like every true German boy, I devoured Karl May’s novels about the Wild West: the tales of Winnetou, a virtuous Apache chief, and his Anglo-American blood brother, “Old Shatterhand.” As he was dying, Winnetou converted to Christianity, a twist that took the story too far for me. So I turned to the “Tecumseh” series by Fritz Steuben, the great-grandson of Baron Steuben, who helped train Washington’s troops at Valley Forge. I was taken by his detailed, vivid accounts of Native American life — and by the gruesome history of a war of extermination. I quit riding with the cowboys in my imagination and instead walked thousands of miles with the great Shawnee, determined to forge a confederacy of tribes to fight Anglo-American encroachment.

I kept reading as I grew older, and I watched Western movies, from Hollywood adventures to the disillusioned, tough Italian “spaghetti Westerns,” produced in Europe. Slowly, I realized that the romantic American West of my childhood might have nothing in common with the

place itself.

Now, half a century and over a dozen trips later, I think the West is the most misunderstood and disrespected region in the United States.

I first saw the West with my own eyes in August of 1985. I was 28 and a Fulbright exchange student at Arizona State University. As I flew from New York to Phoenix, I gazed in fascination at the changing landscape below. Like the settlers a century ago, I saw the green forests of the Midwest give way to prairie, then to vast, mountainous desert pockmarked with bunchgrass, shrubs and cacti. I could hardly contain my excitement.

For the first months, I lived in my own personal Western movie: I was the star, a light-skinned Suebian dude who bushwhacked his way through the labyrinths of Arizona State University and — on weekends — explored the wild backcountry. I was stunned by the countless canyons and the rainbow-colored deserts, by the high wooded mountains and the friendly small towns. I had finally found my way to the Land of the Free.

The national parks became my favorite institution of higher learning, even better than the university. There was no better place to study Ancient Puebloan culture, for instance, than remote Keet Seel Ruin in northern Arizona, where I stood by a knee-high dungheap left by domesticated turkeys back in the 13th century.

But as the novelty passed, I began to see a more nuanced West. I learned that cowboys were once called “cowpokes” and that, far from being considered heroes, they stood at the bottom of a hierarchical society governed by dollar bills, of which they earned bitterly few. Indians were now Native Americans, yet they remained an often-overlooked minority who lived in what struck me as Third World islands within the U.S. — reservations plagued by poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, disease and general disorientation.

Even the cityfolks in Phoenix seemed trapped in what a friend of mine called a “godless, soulless, cultureless” place. Some middle-class families spent \$400 a month on air conditioning and long hours every day stuck in automobiles. In the 1980s, the “Valley of the Sun” could have been one of the world’s centers for photovoltaic and thermo-solar energy. Instead, its electricity came from Palo

Verde Nuclear Power Plant, then the world’s largest reactor complex. My own West Germany, a country smaller than Arizona, took the lead in developing alternative energies and making nuclear power obsolete.

Phoenix also lacked what Europeans treasure in their cities — a vibrant, attractive center. It had copied Los Angeles’ dysfunctional model of suburban sprawl, and its voters rejected every attempt to improve public transport. Some scholars trace modern suburbia to Jefferson’s early-19th century ideal of agrarian democracy — middle-class families living like small farmers on their own little allotments, each with a bungalow, two-car garage, lawn and pool. But after experiencing Phoenix, that theory seemed out of touch with the desert environment.

The city planners and architects had learned nothing from the cultures that had sustained themselves for centuries in this harsh and fragile land. And many Arizonans derided Arcosanti, Paolo Soleri’s architectural experiment in Paradise Valley, as a hangout for old hippies and slackers, though I thought it embodied one of the few viable visions for sustainability in the desert.

I left the West after my Fulbright ended, but returned about a dozen times as a reporter for German Public Radio and as a tourist. The more I saw, the more my feelings grew — both love and a bitter sense of disillusionment.

Nevada was a particularly brutal teacher. In late November 1991, I pulled off State Highway 447 in search of some peace and quiet. I had just witnessed a demonstration of highly sophisticated software at “Strike University,” a training facility for fighter pilots at Fallon Naval Air Station. The clean-cut airmen showed us how they could — simultaneously — track every move of up to three-dozen bombers and fighter planes, as they conducted mock assaults and air battles. It was unsettling; I lost a grandfather in World War II, and though I admired the smart young pilots, I couldn’t help thinking of the pain and suffering their missiles and bombs would inflict on the ground. Fallon is where fighter pilots trained for Operation Desert Storm, and I suspected it would produce more fighters for future wars.

My well-worn Rand McNally Atlas shows military reservations across the West: Yuma Proving Grounds, White Sands Missile Range, Chocolate Moun-



Young Zindel, Germany. COURTESY UDO ZINDEL

tain Gunnery Range, Hawthorne Army Depot, Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range, and the Nevada Test Site, a crater-strewn wasteland, symbol of mankind's ability to self-destruct. European NATO Forces, including German soldiers, also train on these grounds — perhaps the West's darkest places. As the late Charles Bowden wrote in his book, *Redline*, "Americans hate their deserts and consider them useful only for exercises in assault."

After half an hour in the shade of a little cottonwood, I turned back onto the highway, only to stop again a few miles away, drawn by a historical marker near the Truckee River. The sign commemorated the Battle of Pyramid Lake, fought between volunteers, a U.S. Army detachment and a band of Paiute Indians, who were trying to cover their families' retreat into the Black Rock Desert. I had never even heard of it. I took pictures of the marker and the battlefield without really knowing why.

Four years later, around Christmas, I was sitting with my stepfather at the long table of the Tyrolian mountain farm my family has rented for decades, when he asked out of the blue, "Does Pyramid Lake ring a bell for you?" He had found an old suitcase filled with letters from

Karl, a long-forgotten great-grand-uncle who emigrated to the U.S. in 1847. Karl, a soldier, fought at the Second Battle of Pyramid Lake on June 2, 1860. He described it in a letter to his parents in Stuttgart: "I almost lost my life, because one bullet went through my hair right over my right ear without injuring me. I was so stunned at the moment, that I could not find a cartridge."

Those letters reframed my relationship with the West. I can no longer blame "Americans" alone for the darker parts of the region's history, because my own family's history in the West goes back so much further than that of most residents today. Karl was a political prisoner during Germany's Vormärz period, yet he fought Native Americans and helped to destroy their culture. He did this despite his love for the Native people. In a letter from Fortress Alcatraz, he explained why he re-enlisted with the U.S. Army: "City life was really against my grain and I longed to be back in the wilderness with the Indians."

The West is full of contradictions, and I am one of them. Cowboy hats now make me suspicious, especially in cities. They are too often donned by people who hide their own economic and political agendas underneath the broad brims. I have little

tolerance for the modern West's aggressive stance against taxes and government and regulations, and its overuse of the mythology of rugged individualism. My heroes are the people who are striving to live sensibly and sustainably in the West, much as the one-armed explorer John Wesley Powell advocated 140 years ago. And I hope, and believe, that their number is growing.

On my desk at home in Germany sits a photo that keeps the West ever-present to me. It shows a colorful sunset from Grand Canyon's Imperial Point, looking toward the Hopi lands; huge, lead-colored thunderheads loom in the distance.

The picture brings back hundreds of sweet memories: of Chicano friends in Arizona mining towns, of Native American friends at the university, of ranchers who welcomed me into their homes. It conjures up hikes and vistas and campsites where I encountered indescribable beauty. Around the equinox, the sun shines through my window directly onto the photo, and its light enlivens the colors so that the canyon seems on fire.

I'm not sure when I'll visit again, but I know I will return. And when I do, I'll discover new things that will shatter and rekindle my unquenchable romance with this extraordinary place. ■

"I realized that the romantic American West of my childhood might have nothing in common with the place itself," says Udo Zindel. Schoolboys play Cowboys and Indians in Weslaco, Texas in 1942. ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN/ LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, FSA/ OWI COLLECTION, [LC-USF33-003619-M3]



Raccoonboy's guide to exploring

I moved to Colorado Springs to attend college when I was 18 years old. Like so many good outdoorsy New Englanders before me, it wasn't books and lectures that drew me west so much as it was the mountains, the Rockies. I figured my four years on the southern end of Colorado's Front Range would be filled with alpine scrambles, sudden thunderstorms, airy bivouacs, and wide views.

Little did I know.

By my sophomore year, I'd hiked a few hundred miles and climbed a dozen or so 14,000-foot peaks, but something felt off. Getting in the car each weekend to drive into the high country was fun, but it was also a chore — and alienating, too. Each outing left me more lost in the place I actually lived, the Monday-through-Friday maze of strip malls, car dealerships and industrial blight. After pulling an all-nighter writing a term paper on, say, Plato's Theory of Forms, I needed a brain-cleanse, and I needed it fast.

Where was my local nature? Where was my Colorado Springs backyard?

Turns out it was, well, right there in the backyard. Snaking through and beneath the city grid were a number of sickly yet wondrous waterways, the living, flowing energy of the place corralled by concrete culverts, dirt embankments and razor-wire

fences. You know these creeks. We all do. They gather shopping carts, empty vodka bottles, thick brush and raccoons. They are both repulsive and intriguing. They are part of the landscape of 21st century America, like it or not.

For two years, I aimlessly, joyously, filthily explored the sunken spaces, the ghost spaces, the spaces routinely overlooked and underloved. George Mallory said it best in reference to climbing Everest: "Because it's there." Slowly but surely, with each Tuesday afternoon and Saturday morning spent slushing and slinking and discovering, the mountain ridges slipped from my mind. Eventually, I myself became a raccoon. Not a real raccoon, of course, but something close — a raccoonboy. A creature caught between the foothills and the flatlands, between civilization and the wild. A masked adventurer with muck beneath his paws.

So: If your travel funds are running low, or if you're tired of driving hours to seek postcard-quality scenery, or if you've finally had enough of the notion that excitement always lies elsewhere, beyond the glittery horizon — here, grab ahold of my tail. Come along with Raccoonboy. I'm no expert, but I'll gladly share with you some things I've learned about breaking into what, for lack of a better term, we might call the Trash Can of the Everyday.

the urban wilds

BY LEATH TONINO

ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE GLADFELTER

PICK A CITY, ANY CITY

Perhaps Los Angeles is the Yosemite Valley of urban wilderness and Phoenix is the Grand Canyon of sprawl. I don't know, nor do I particularly care. Idealizing any landscape, whether pristine or paved, has a way of dulling our senses to the miraculous possibilities of the here and now. Here and now in Las Cruces, New Mexico? In Twin Falls, Idaho? Heck, yes, to both, and to a hundred other cities, big and small. The great liberating joy of finding nature everywhere is — duh, finding nature everywhere. Start where you are. Step into that manicured park or designated greenbelt, then work your way out to the weedy lots, the abandoned buildings, the shadowy zones near exit ramps.

GO WITH THE FLOW

There are countless portals to the urban wilds — trails, alleys, Wal-Mart roofs, the list goes on — but in my opinion, nothing beats a pinched, gurgling drainage. Gutters collect water. Water collects life. Sometimes you get an open canal, sometimes a froggy trough, sometimes a trickling tunnel that beckons you into the sub-freeway bowels. Once you sink your left boot in past the ankle, you'll be surprised how eagerly the right boot will follow.

WHEN IN DOUBT, CLIMB

A few years ago, I went on "vacation" and spent four days wandering the San Francisco grid, each night setting a hammock high in the crown of a redwood or cypress tree. My neighbors in the branches above the sidewalks were red-shouldered hawks, scrub jays, rainstorms, and long lines of ants. One morning, when I returned to earth, I surprised a homeless guy sleeping in a cardboard bed against the tree's trunk. A secret green metropolis awaits those who crane their necks. (Acrophobes needn't feel left out; try clawing your way into a clump of shrubs.)

FENCES ARE MEANT FOR HOPPING

An important question: Is this legal? An honest answer: Beats me. The goal is communion with elemental reality, with urban ecosystems, not with cops and ticked-off homeowners. If you're serious about following your own fascination, you might feel inclined to make like a dandelion seed and drift back and forth across the lines on human maps. Tsk, tsk! Bad seed. I myself have "accidentally" trespassed more times than I care to count, but that's not to say you should. If you do, however, be sure to tread lightly and always — I repeat always — plead ignorance. And apologize.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

Which is to say, dress for splinters, dog feces, cobwebs, toxic sludge, desperate heat, snow squalls, chicken-wire and knee-deep cigarette butts. You want to feel loose, limber, flexible, free. My suggestion: Wear what you find. There isn't a ditch in all the West that won't cough up a beat pair of jeans and a tattered sweatshirt if you give it a chance. Take your rags home, wash them, and you've got yourself a uniform.

DON'T TOUCH THE WILDLIFE

Humans are animals, too, right? Yes, and a big part of the braided fear-fun of exploring a city's ratty fringe and shriveled heart is bumping into other wandering conspecifics. The maze of alleys and underpasses is not just your playground, it's also somebody's home, somebody who has likely fallen on harder times than you can even imagine. So, please, show consideration for tarp encampments and stashes of what might at first appear as broken, soggy junk. Meth-heads and screaming weirdoes can be threatening, but I've found that most folks are kind and interesting. They know the territory, and they often have an uncanny sense of incoming weather.

GEAR 101

If you're a dork, fine, bring your GPS and your GoPro Selfie Stick and your cyborg Bluetooth headset and all the rest. Personally, I'm a fan of baby carrots, a Swiss army knife and a harmonica. Headlamps can be useful for nighttime missions, as can beer. A fellow raccoonboy used to carry cans of spraypaint in a canvas satchel, but again, that's bad seed behavior. Go light. If you think you need it, you probably don't.

LEAVE NO TRACE

Respect the gunky, funky cracks and crannies where crumpled orange parking cones collect and foxes rear their young. Give those pups a wide berth. My policy on trash is as follows: I will unearth cans and other artifacts for inspection (or just to kick them around a bit), but I will not remove them from their habitat. Recycling is not the name of the game. Like the true backcountry, urban wilderness cannot be improved upon.

READING CAN BE FUN

Granted, you don't want to bury your nose in a book at the expense of missing some smog-enriched sunset (nor get so distracted you step on a snake or a rusty spike), but literature can do wonders for deepening your engagement with the ground underfoot. Cities are thick — socially, historically, architecturally, geologically, botanically and zoologically. Research what was going on in a given place 100 years ago. A book is a shovel. Dig a hole with it, and lower yourself in, headfirst.

STILLNESS IS YOUR BUDDY

Great blue herons stand like statues in a pond by the scrap-metal yard. Shabby cottonwoods near the train tracks speak to those who listen. And the raccoons, they'll all but shake your hand if you let them. I have sat vigil more often than I have waded, clambered, run and squirmed, and what I have learned is that silence and patience are the urban naturalist's best friends. Pretend each dumpster is a grizzly bear. Approach with caution, on tiptoes. Better yet, hunker down and watch. Wait and see what happens, then wait some more and see what happens next.

AND REMEMBER ...

There are worlds within worlds within worlds — to discover, to get lost in, to celebrate. We are all children with wonder sparkling in our eyes, all foreigners here in the Local, the Normal, the Trash Can of the Everyday. Or at least we can be. As the Zen master Robert Aitken once wrote: "It is possible to train yourself to be dull. ... The dull person is one who has practiced not noticing closely." So get out. Pay attention. Keep your tail clean and your paws dirty. And do as Raccoonboy says: No matter how thirsty you are, never drink the water. ■





HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

ARIZONA

Does God care passionately about the right to bear arms? Republican Rep. Eddie Farnsworth kicked off a metaphysical debate in the Arizona Legislature recently, when he asserted that the Second Amendment guaranteed people the God-given right to self-defense, reports the *Phoenix New Times*. Rep. Sally Ann Gonzales, a Democrat, rose to disagree. “Twice on this floor I’ve heard members say that I have the God-given right to bear arms,” she said, “and since I know that God didn’t write the Constitution I just wanted to state that. And I vote ‘no.’” Another lawmaker echoed her take on American history, praising the “humans, great humans, who wrote the Constitution.” Farnsworth countered by insisting that God weighed in on the Constitution because He got involved in the Declaration of Independence; after all, it famously declares that “Americans are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” At that point, legislators apparently agreed to disagree about God’s position on the two gun bills in question.

COLORADO

Exactly what is a “conservative?” Freshman Republican State Rep. Dan Thurlow, who represents Grand Junction, a very Republican city in western Colorado, recently broke ranks with his party when he voted to ban “conversion therapy,” the controversial notion that assumes mental health professionals can “cure” people of being gay, reports the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*. “To me, the conservative position is to stay out of other people’s lives,” Thurlow explained, “and everybody should have the ability to live the lives they want. I’m not trying to change anybody.”

UTAH

Court-ordered deaths could change dramatically, and noisily, in Utah, if firing squads make a comeback. The state Senate passed a bill that would make Utah the only state to allow firing squads to carry out a death penalty if execution drugs aren’t available. Just a decade ago, the state abandoned firing squads as inhumane. But



Montana’s oldest trophy hunter. CARROLL VAN WEST/
MONTANAHISTORICLANDSCAPE.COM

bill sponsor Paul Ray argued recently in Salt Lake City that “a team of trained marksmen is faster and more humane than the drawn-out deaths that have occurred in botched lethal injections,” reports the *Associated Press*. Meanwhile, a far different bill awaits action by the state Senate; if passed, it would allow patients with certain medical conditions to receive prescriptions for edible marijuana. But here’s the rub: An agent of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration warned that backcountry marijuana farms harm the environment and even corrupt rabbits, who “had cultivated a taste for the marijuana ... one of them refused to leave us. ...” The *Washington Post*’s Christopher Ingraham was particularly bemused by agent Matt Fairbanks’ remarks, especially given the current “nation-wide epidemic of catnip abuse.” Fairbanks’ hare-raising stories failed to frighten his listeners; as the *Post* concluded: “There was a time, not too long ago, when drug warriors terrified a nation with images of ‘the devil’s weed’ and ‘reefer madness.’ Now, it seems that enforcers of marijuana law are conjuring up a stoned bunny?”

IDAHO

Explaining that Hindus “worship cows,” Idaho State Sen. Steve Vick boycotted morning prayers at a recent legislative session because

a Hindu cleric had been invited to give the invocation. The *Idaho Statesman* labeled Vick’s behavior, and that of two other boycotting state senators, a “pitiful” prayer snub, and the *Idaho Press-Tribune* headlined its editorial: “Time to end public prayers in the Statehouse?” For his part, Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, politely turned the other cheek and prayed to the “deity supreme” that the state’s elected officials “may long together dwell in unity and concord.” Given that four out of five people in Idaho call themselves Christians, it is not surprising that the Kootenai County Republican Central Committee recently considered declaring Idaho a “Christian state.” In the same vein, reports the *Los Angeles Times*, the Idaho’s Ada County Highway District recently voted to start its public meetings with a prayer — a policy they reversed after some citizens loudly protested that “God doesn’t have much to do with asphalt.”

WASHINGTON

The monthly *Whatcom Watch*, a community forum on government, environmental issues and media, has been a blast of fresh air since 1992, taking on everything from coal terminals proposed in vulnerable locations to the alarming effects of dairy pollution, as illustrated in the recent headline: “Got milk? Got manure!” There are 48,964 cows in Whatcom County, and according to the Environmental Protection Agency, each dairy cow can generate over 120 pounds of manure each day. This prodigious output does not vanish into thin air; it gets dumped in unlined lagoons or spread as fertilizer on farm fields. The result is pollution that compromises the drinking water of 20,000 county residents, who depend on “one of the most contaminated aquifers in the state.” So in case you’ve been wondering, kids: That is *not* chocolate milk being spilled at your local dairy.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org.



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“Elected officials (in Wyoming) have been moving to expand cloud seeding even though they lack convincing proof that it works. At the same time, **many elected officials refuse to accept the existence of global warming.**”

Allen Best, in his essay, “Cloud seeding is still a work in progress,” from *Writers on the Range*, hcn.org/wotr