

Monsoon Postcards

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one



Traveling with a Purpose

“How do you like Madagascar?” The waiter at Ku-de-ta—the name is a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the country’s history of illegal power grabs—asked me the question he probably asked all foreigners at the restaurant.

His timing was bad. I was exhausted and dispirited. I wanted to say, “Not as much as I did yesterday,” but my French wasn’t up to the linguistic nuance and I didn’t want to make a well-meaning waiter feel uncomfortable. Instead I smiled, mumbled something affirmative, and reached for my beer.

We all face setbacks in our lives and are supposed to grow stronger because of them, but my colleague Andrew Carlson and I were feeling unusually fragile and insecure as we tried to process what had happened earlier that day in March 2016. We had made our first visit to Antananarivo, Madagascar’s capital, eighteen months earlier to launch a large-scale research project for UNICEF, the United Nations Children’s Fund. It was a wide-ranging study of knowledge, beliefs, and practices in health, nutrition, hygiene, water, sanitation, education, and child protection, key issues for the agency. Our six-person international team had worked with colleagues from the University of Antananarivo and the national statistics agency to design the study, conducted in three coastal regions. Earlier that day, we were informed by e-mail that, after more than a year of work and almost \$500,000 spent, UNICEF had decided to reject the research report and shut down the project. We had been given

no advance warning. The only reason given was a vague reference to “inadequate data analysis.” We were upset and confused.

When you’re feeling down, it’s easy to vent your frustration at your environment—the place, the people, the waiter at Ku-de-ta. But as Andrew and I enjoyed an exceptional lunch and rounded it off with a *rum arrangé* (the flavored rum that is customarily offered as an after-dinner digestive), our mood mellowed. We were at one of Antananarivo’s best restaurants, savoring French haute cuisine at incredibly reasonable prices. Outside lay a picturesque, historic city built on sacred hills where every walk or taxi trip yielded new sights and sounds. I was looking forward to a weekend trip to the countryside with my Malagasy university colleague, Richard Samuel, to visit his hometown and family tomb.

This was my fifth visit to Madagascar, and I had become enthralled with the country, its people, and its culture. My bad mood, I decided, had everything to do with our shabby treatment by the UNICEF office and nothing to do with Madagascar.

The waiter brought the bill. “You know,” I said, “I like Madagascar very, very much.” He smiled, and I did too.

Itinerant Academic Worker

I’ve been fortunate enough to have visited more than forty countries on five continents. Born and brought up in Britain, I’m grateful to my parents for introducing me to travel on family camping vacations in France and Spain. In the 1970s, when I worked as a journalist, my first wife Claire and I took budget trips to Mediterranean countries—Portugal, Spain, Italy, Morocco, Greece, and Turkey—traveling by bus or hitchhiking, camping or staying in youth hostels or fleabag hotels that didn’t rate a single tourist star.

I moved to the United States for postgraduate study in 1978, began university teaching two years later, and didn’t travel much for the next fifteen years. Since the mid-1990s, most of my travel has technically been for work, not pleasure. I say “technically” because I enjoy most trips, even though I work long days in sometimes difficult conditions. That’s because I am traveling with a purpose. By contrast, I’ve had vacations that didn’t give me much pleasure. I find beaches boring, resorts unappealing. I’m not a gambler or souvenir shopper, don’t play shuffleboard or mini-golf, and don’t like Las Vegas shows; I don’t think I’d enjoy a cruise.

My trips have been as a teacher, trainer, researcher, project director, and some other titles I've forgotten. Unlike the typical business traveler, I can get away with dressing academic casual—a shirt and khakis. There are ties (mostly gifts) in my closet. On average, I wear a tie once a year. Not every year. Fortunately, the organizations that hire me are looking at my proposal, résumé, and experience, not my wardrobe.

In June 2010, I officially retired from Ohio University after a thirty-year academic career. There was no way I was going to take up golf, bridge, or bingo, enroll in classes in pottery or furniture making, let alone sit on the front porch drinking iced tea and comparing Medicare supplement plans. For me, to retire was to move on—to have the time and freedom to work in interesting places.

It's often difficult to describe to strangers what I do. Sometimes, I dodge the question and tell them I'm a consultant. That's a convenient but unhelpful response, because no one (not even those who use the word on their business cards) can easily describe what it means to be a consultant. It's a catchall that covers a range of services—from training mercenary armies to appraising antiques. "Oh, a consultant, that must be interesting," is the usual reaction. "Sometimes," I reply. That's when the conversation usually ends.

Recently, I've taken to describing myself, somewhat mischievously, as an "itinerant academic worker." I can go wherever my academic and professional credentials take me. No regular classes to teach. No students to advise. No faculty meetings. No research expectations. It's the academic open road.

The real bonus and joy of travel has been to write about the places I've seen, the people I've met, the experiences I've had. Since cameras went digital, many travelers record their memories visually, posting images on websites, social media, and sharing sites. I shoot some pictures, but mostly I take notes and ask questions. What are they harvesting in that field? Are those houses made of bamboo? What does that road sign mean? What's the name of this village? What are we eating? Is that a wedding celebration? Did you see that elephant we just passed on the road?

I don't want to suggest that all travel is interesting. Travel writer Thomas Swick put it well: "Readers sometimes say to me, 'You always meet the most interesting people when you travel.' I tell them, 'Not really, I just write about them when I do.' Most of the time I'm

wandering around lonely and aimless. In my own way, I am as guilty as the cliché mongers of perpetuating the idea of travel as a continuously fascinating activity—though all writers shape their experiences into an unrepresentative series of highlights; otherwise our stories would be too boring to read.”¹

Traveling with me can be tiring, especially for those who want to sleep. I rarely do. In a bus or car, on a train, or on foot, I am constantly scribbling in my notebook or on whatever piece of paper I have handy—an airline boarding card, a restaurant menu, or even the background briefing paper I promised to read on the way from the hotel to the office. I write down what I see and learn because that’s the only way I can connect the dots later. Even in a place filled with new sights, sounds, and smells, what is interesting and unexpected on first encounter is more familiar the next time around, and less worthy of recording. The Antananarivo I first visited in September 2014 was a fascinating new place, unlike any other city I had ever seen. I described it as “Paris with rice paddies.” On my second visit three months later, it was interesting but less surprising; by the time of my fifth visit in March 2016, the city seemed less noteworthy. I made many notes on my first and second trips, but fewer on the later ones. However, even in places I’ve visited before, I always learn something new. Often, it comes in chance conversations—in buses, trains, taxis, and shops, at roadside cafes and markets. Indeed, the best insights are often gained by just hanging out with people. You strike up a conversation with the desk clerk or the passenger sitting next to you. You never know where it will lead.

Much of the time, I rely on colleagues to translate. I mean this in the broadest sense—not only the literal translation of words and phrases from another language but interpretations of history, society, and culture. I have also learned not to take what I am told at face value. In any country, there is no single, accepted history or vision for the future; instead, there are many perspectives, and they are constantly in motion, fanned by the winds of politics, nationalism, and identity.

I’ve been weaving my notes into narratives, trying to put places and people in historical and cultural context, since my travels to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia in the mid-1990s. I have also written articles for newspapers, magazines, and online outlets. The Central Asia stories, originally sent as e-mail letters to family and friends, formed the basis for my first offbeat memoir, *Postcards from Stanland: Journeys*

in *Central Asia*, published in 2016. It recounted my travels and work in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

This book has a broader geographical sweep, describing a broad and circuitous arc around the Indian Ocean with insights into the history, geography, politics, economy, climate, and belief systems of four countries where I've traveled over the last decade. My journey begins in Madagascar's chaotic capital, Antananarivo, then wanders through the Central Highlands, the eastern rain forest, and the savannah and desert of the southwest, offering glimpses of the history, culture, and politics of a beguiling but desperately poor country. From Madagascar, I make the long leap northeast across the Arabian Sea to the Indian subcontinent. India defies all generalizations because of its social, ethnic, and religious diversity. My narrative begins in the capital Delhi, then broadens out in space and time, exploring the colonial legacy, the partition of British India, and the country's demographic, economic, and environmental challenges. From the north, I move to the ancient kingdom of Hyderabad, and finally to the underdeveloped "chicken-neck," the northeastern states of Assam and Meghalaya. Then I follow the Brahmaputra River south to Bangladesh, a country defined by its rivers and struggle for independence. From the traffic jams and garment factories of Dhaka, I travel to the rice bowl and commercial centers of western Bangladesh, to the tea gardens of the northeast, and to the delta region—the front line for climate change. My journey ends in Indonesia—at Banda Aceh, ground zero for the 2004 tsunami, the noise and traffic of the capital, Jakarta, ancient Yogyakarta, and the beaches and backcountry of Bali.

Ambivalent about Development

My first experience in international development work came in December 1995 when, at short notice, I took an assignment to set up a journalists' training center in southern Kyrgyzstan, a region that had experienced ethnic conflict over land, resources, and political power. My US embassy liaison flew with me to the city of Osh, stayed a couple of days, and then left, wishing me good luck. I spoke only a few words of Russian and had few contacts. I hired a student as interpreter, found an apartment, visited local media, launched a search for a center manager, and enlisted Peace Corps volunteers to teach English classes in exchange for Internet access.

Four years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan's economy was still in freefall: factories and collective farms had closed, the currency devalued, pensions almost worthless, and power cuts frequent. Often I was the only diner in a restaurant where a sad-faced waiter apologized that most items on the menu were not available. In subzero temperatures, families squatted on the broken concrete sidewalks, their possessions—kitchen utensils, auto parts, school textbooks, old clothes, Soviet memorabilia—spread out on blankets. I don't know who was buying because most passersby were just as poor as the sellers.

Before my work in Kyrgyzstan, the problems of the developing world had seemed remote and abstract to me—a wire service report on the latest famine or civil war somewhere in Africa, a TV charity appeal with images of suffering women and children. Now I was seeing them for myself. My experience convinced me that I had the skills and temperament to work effectively in an unfamiliar and challenging situation. A quarter of a century and two revolutions later, the Osh Media Center is still going strong, despite political and financial pressures.

Over the next twenty years, I returned frequently to Central Asia—to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. For my university, I took student groups to Hungary, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, and Thailand and managed an exchange program between Indonesian and US television journalists. I had two Fulbright Teaching Fellowships—in Kyrgyzstan (1996–97) and in Kazakhstan (2011). In Asia and southern Africa, I have worked for a veritable alphabet soup of international and government organizations. I have conducted workshops on training techniques for broadcast managers and worked with journalists to improve their reporting on social, economic, and environmental issues. For six years, I led a team that offered a global training course on communication for development (C4D) for UNICEF staff, with workshops held in Ohio, Johannesburg, and Hyderabad. The Madagascar research fiasco was followed by a successful two-year project to introduce C4D curricula at universities in Bangladesh and improve the research skills of faculty.

To work in development, you have to believe you can make a difference, however small, in people's lives. It's all too easy to become frustrated—by bureaucracy, ill-conceived project goals, and especially unrealistic timelines. Social and cultural change occurs slowly; no mass media campaign, however creative or far-reaching, will suddenly transform people's attitudes and behaviors. It may take a generation for

people to change the way they think about issues such as child marriage or girls' education, and another generation to do something about them. Yet donors demand fast, measurable results that will show up as a good return on investment in annual reports and press releases. They account for the funds they receive on a yearly basis and have to report results. The "annual report syndrome," as an eloquent critic of top-down approaches to development, Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, calls it, "is one of the worst enemies of development" because it "forces a chain of lies and exaggerations from the grassroots level up to the implementers and funding institutions."²

The "lies and exaggerations" often begin earlier in the cycle, when government and international development agencies invite bids for contracts. In the United States, a relatively small number of not-for-profit and private-sector organizations, most of them in the Washington, DC area (earning them the sobriquet of "Beltway Bandits"), compete for lucrative contracts—not only from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) but from the Departments of Treasury, Commerce, and Agriculture, as well as from other agencies. Because all the bidders are staffed by seasoned professionals and have a host of consultants on their rosters, it's difficult to pick a winner based on expertise. More often than not, the agency awards the contract to the bidder who promises the most for the least money and has lined up an impressive list of partners and collaborators. After winning the contract, the organization spends months negotiating a work plan; inevitably, goals and activities are scaled back, and partners dropped, because there isn't enough money to do what was originally promised.

Although development agencies pay lip service to the idea of community participation, most projects are designed and implemented by professionals to meet donor priorities. In many sub-Saharan African countries, more people die each year from malaria or diarrhea than from AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, yet more money is earmarked for reproductive health than for mosquito nets and oral rehydration kits. Even when reproductive health is a priority, aid comes with conditions; USAID contractors are shackled by Congressional guidelines that specify the percentage of funds to be spent on abstinence programs, even if condom distribution has more impact.

"The more we invest in development, the more we contribute to the growing of the cemetery of development." That's Gumucio Dagron's

gloomy assessment. Newly built schools are closed because no money was allocated to pay teachers or buy desks and books. Water and sanitation systems are abandoned because no one knows how to maintain them. Gumucio Dagron offers a catalog of failed projects—abandoned hospitals, broken-down vehicles, and “two thousand post office mail boxes rusting under the rain in a village of five hundred illiterate families who neither received nor wrote letters.”³

I cannot be as pessimistic as Gumucio Dagron, but I have my own catalog of ill-conceived and botched development projects that have failed to make a difference in people’s lives. I’ve also seen well-planned projects that have helped lift people out of poverty, improved their health, and provided their children with education. In my experience, the best investments are in human resources, in helping people gain the knowledge and skills they need to make a difference in their own countries. That’s why I’ve gained the most satisfaction from education and training programs. Of course, not all my workshop participants apply what they have learned to become better managers, journalists, or C4D professionals, but some (maybe more than I realize) do so. And when they are passing on what they have learned to others, I know I have achieved something.

I continue to worry about the unintended consequences of development aid. We need to feed the hungry, but will massive food shipments depress prices on the market and drive local farmers off the land? International charities urge individuals to buy desks for schoolchildren so they do not have to sit on the dirt classroom floor. Would the money be better spent on population control, reducing average family size (and the number of schoolchildren)? In some countries, foreign aid accounts for almost half of the government’s annual budget and a significant percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Are we creating a culture of dependency, a neocolonial relationship between the donor and receiver countries, by making them continue to rely on foreign aid?

Put me down as ambivalent about development.

Postcards

I am from a generation that enjoyed sending and receiving postcards. I haven’t received many recently. It’s easier to post a selfie to Facebook from under a beach umbrella than to get out of your chair, find a shop,

buy a postcard, write it, buy a stamp, and mail it. But I miss sending and receiving them. For me, the pro-forma “Weather lovely, wine cheap, *pâté de foie gras* gave me indigestion, wish you were here” greeting was never enough. I bought cards with the largest possible writing space and usually managed to cram more than one hundred words about my travels into the left-hand side.

This book, like *Postcards from Stanland*, combines personal experience, interviews, and research. It is not intended as a travel guide. It’s not an academic study or the kind of analysis produced by policy wonks, although it offers background and insights. Think of it as a series of scenes or maybe oversized postcards (with space for a few thousand rather than one hundred words) that I would have sent if you were on my friends and family list. Which you can be, if you send me your e-mail address.