

## THE MIND OF A TRAVELER

When we heard about the blind Buddhist monk who lived in a cave at the top of a mountain and answered questions for visitors, we knew we had to go. It was too rich to miss—this was the living example of the proverbial guru who is sought out by those looking for the meaning of life. The problem was that the mountain he lived atop of was no ordinary mountain—it was in the Himalayas.

At the time we learned about him, I was in Nepal photographing a story on the Sherpas for National Geographic, and my then-fiance, now wife Jeannie was with me. We were so removed from civilization that we were living without electricity, without indoor plumbing, running water or telephones and without cars. To get anywhere we had to hike, carrying our gear at 12,000 plus feet.

The hike to the monk's cave was not easy. It was straight up and we had to stop every few steps to catch our breath. When we arrived, we walked into a dark, dank cave, where a tiny man with a long beard and milky eyes sat in the corner. We were exhausted and drank the Tibetan tea the monk's attendant offered us. The monk invited us to ask questions. We couldn't think of anything overly profound, but Jeannie, who lived in New York City at the time, asked how she would be able to balance having a family and continuing her work as a writer. The monk rolled some strange looking dice with skinny fingers that ended in long, yellowing nails. The attendant told the monk what came up on the dice and then through our interpreter we heard the answer: If you move from where you're living now, you will be happy.

It was an amazing answer because I had been trying for six months to get Jeannie to move from New York to Austin. His answer had a powerful impact on her. It was the push she needed. A month after we returned to the States from Nepal, she had packed up her New York apartment and was on her way to Austin.

I think of this experience because for me it epitomizes the true spirit of traveling. I believe that true travelers are not the kind of people who sit in a plush hotel and enjoy the culture from a far. The real rewards of traveling often come from work, when you've pushed yourself to get beyond the tourist sights and out of your own comfort zone. We didn't know what we were going find at the top of the mountain, but we were willing to make the effort because we know that it's only by putting yourself out there that you gain anything. What we came away with was literally life-changing.

I must press myself to witness the culture as part of my job as a photographer. How else can I present an honest look at a society? However, you don't have to be a National Geographic photographer to have the same kind of experiences. It's a matter of your state of mind.

Good travelers also don't visit a country with a set of expectations, or try to impose their own standards. Yes, some places aren't as clean or as comfortable as the U.S. or the customs might be crude or offensive, but it's only by going in with an open mind that you can really broaden yourself and learn about the world.

When Jeannie and I were in Bali several years ago when I was photographing another story for National Geographic, we ended up going to a funeral party for a member of the royal family in one of the provinces. As part of the services, the royal family invited all the people in the province who had not been able to afford a funeral party for their loved ones to join in. This meant that many families were going back to graves and digging up the bones of their relatives so that they could finally give them a proper send off. Jeannie and I watched the people taking the bones out of the graves and carefully placing them on creations that looked like floats in a parade. This was not like anything we had seen before and some outsiders might have been put off by or spooked by the whole affair. But we made ourselves look beyond our own sense of propriety and continued to be part of the event. Our reward was seeing the procession of people moving down to a gorgeous beach and then at dusk, watching them take the remains into their canoes and throw them into the sea. It was one of the most beautiful

scenes I've witnessed—the setting sun, the black beach, the colorful floats and boats and the emotions of the people. But we only got there by not allowing ourselves to judge the first step—the digging up of the graves.

I believe the only reason to travel is to dive into another culture and try to see life from a different point of view. If people only travel to a new place to see different architecture or dress, then they're only experiencing a costume set piece. And if that's all you're interested in, you might as well look at pictures in a magazine—National Geographic sometimes has some decent ones.

Photographer Robb Kendrick and writer Jeannie Ralston own Hill Country Lavender in Blanco, which they started after traveling to Provence and learning about lavender production from French farmers.