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Here, There and Everywhere

A New York lawyer visited every country in the world over 50 years.



A bus in Dakar, Senegal.

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By Edward Kosner
March 20, 2015 1:20 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

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A friend once told me that he often puts himself to sleep by—instead of counting sheep—naming as many obscure countries as he can: “Tuvalu . . . Burkina Faso . . . Andorra . . . Palau . . . Belize . . . Azerbaijan . . . zzzzzz.” Albert Podell has done him one better. He has actually gone to all those places—and 190 more—and survived to tell about it.

“Around the World in 50 Years” is his jokey, politically incorrect, thoughtful and continuously engaging chronicle of the 102 separate journeys he took to accomplish his self-inflicted and likely unprecedented mission of visiting every recognized country on earth. Helpfully, he even includes a chapter, vetted by a law professor, defining what makes a place a nation. (Tiny, independent Pacific islands like Nauru, yes; non-self-governing British territories like the Cayman Islands in the Caribbean, no.)

AROUND THE WORLD IN 50 YEARS

By Albert Podell
Thomas Dunne, 354 pages, \$26.99

He was first infected by the extreme-travel bug in 1965, when he set off with some comrades on a trans-world road trip in a Toyota 4X4, an old Jeep and a trailer with a half-ton of supplies. He ultimately covered 26 countries in North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Central America in 581 days—an arduous and occasionally perilous warm-up for what turned out to be the next 50 years of gallivanting around the globe.

Readers won’t confuse Mr. Podell, a well-to-do retired lawyer and quondam magazine editor, for the master travel writer Paul Theroux, but they do share a taste for describing the squalor of sub-Saharan Africa and forlorn Micronesia in near-sadistic detail. Mr. Podell even gives his destinations a PPPR (“Podell Potty Paper Rating”), ranging from 1 (soft white) through 4 (newspaper) to 7 (no public toilets at all).

He calls Haiti “the worst dung heap I’d been in”—even worse than Nauru, which was actually a giant mound of seabird guano until all the phosphate-rich stuff was sold off, leaving the natives bereft, or Burkina Faso in West Africa, where the author fell into a ravine. Nor is he a big fan of another Pacific isle, Palau, where he was served a fragrant pie filled with a dozen fruit bats “facing up . . . with their fragile little wings spread and touching . . . hirsute ears erect and slightly pinkish . . . and all of them looking pathetically and accusingly, *right at me.*”

He can’t resist regaling the armchair traveler with some of the other entrees on his vagabond diet, from roadkill ant eater in Panama to monkey brains in Hong Kong, Mekong rat in Vietnam and oven-roasted tarantula in some other godforsaken place. Fortunately, his digestive tract is as indestructible as the duct-taped pants and I [heart] NY T-shirts he sports on his travels.

Like Paul Theroux, Mr. Podell sticks to local transport. So he has endless excruciating adventures on no-maintenance Third World airlines, when his flights are delayed, canceled or, in some cases, obliterated by the sudden bankruptcy of the carrier. On Air Uganda, he finds, there is “no preflight safety video. . . . And no stewardess standing in the aisle pulling life-vest toggles. . . . This four-year-old shoestrapping airline knew that if we were going down, we were going *down.*” The 10-hour bus rides over dirt tracks are no more reassuring, not to mention the shakedown at customs and endless wrangles over visas to places (like Chad and Angola) that few septuagenarian New Yorkers likely want to visit in the first place.

His age notwithstanding, Mr. Podell likes to brag about the younger women who have inexplicably volunteered to accompany him on his travels over the years—he lists 34 by first name in his acknowledgments. And he ends the book with the triumphant announcement of his marriage to a fetching young Russian émigré named Nadezda, born, he reports, 20 years after he finished his first round-the-world trip.

For all his macho posturing and mockery of some of the wretched of the earth, Mr. Podell can be a sensitive tourist and a shrewd observer. Without glossing over its Big Brotherly ambience, he finds the capital of North Korea a revelation. “I was not prepared for the modernity and wealth of Pyongyang,” he writes. “I’d expected a shabby, run-down town not much different than the capitals of many poor nations, so I was amazed to find instead a clean, modern, prosperous-looking, smoothly functioning, and livable city. It may be the world’s largest Potemkin village, but it more than did its job of creating a favorable impression.”

Elsewhere he writes about how the do-gooder staffers of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations who swarm developing countries like Macedonia, Kosovo and East Timor convulse the local economies. They can spend \$60 for dinner in a land where most people don’t earn that much in a month, he reports, pushing prices out of reach of the poor they are supposedly there to help.

He marvels at the biodiversity and the ingenious rice culture of Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world, just off the southeast coast of Africa. Rice, he points out, is the basic food of half of humanity, but production has essentially stayed flat since the 1960s Green Revolution, even as world population has doubled. Now climate change is putting added pressure on rice harvests, while the global population is projected to grow to 9.6 billion by midcentury.

In Ethiopia, Chad, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria and Mali, Mr. Podell comes face to face with the inroads being made by militant Islam. “It is the same war Islam almost won a thousand years ago,” he writes, “when the Saracen sword slashed its bloody way to the walls of Madrid and the border of China, but a war in which Islam today” has access to nuclear weapons, endless supplies of oil and funding from Gulf-state fundamentalists.

Still, the rewards of Mr. Podell’s book are less his geopolitical insights than his endearing appetite for adventure and the pleasures he unerringly finds at the ends of the earth.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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