

Americans Do Their Business Abroad

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THE PEACE CORPS LATRINE READER

Edited by:
Jake Fawson & Steve McNutt
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“*La Yunga*” first appeared in Back Road to Crazy.

Front, back cover and book design by Steve McNutt.

This book is dedicated to all of the creepy crawlies that went bump in the night and in our intestines, without whom we would not be who we are today.

Acknowledgments

American-sized portions of appreciation go to globetrotting shutterbug Noah Jackson for providing the cover photograph of a fine fisherman from the Philippines named Nestor, and to Elizabeth Griffin for sending us the back page photograph of her husband, Jerry Loudenback (taken by Bud Veazie). To learn more about what Jerry did for his country, try *Finger Food*. For more on Nestor, read Noah's piece *Breaking the Storm Barrier*. (And if you're in need of a globetrotting shutterbug, send Noah an email: jackson.noah@gmail.com.) Finally, when things get tough, remember that Mama Fougamou's twice-baked frog skins will sustain you through trying times.

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Foreword

“These are the stories that got me uninvited from a few dinner parties.”

— *a contributor to this humble effort.*

BEFORE LAUNCHING YOU, dear reader, into this book of tales told by some of the bravest, finest Peace Corps Volunteers around, we offer a caveat.

Writing by Peace Corps Volunteers often brings certain expectations of heartwarming stories of uplifting work and friends made while bettering oneself alongside the people of [Insert Country]. Those are nice stories. We like those stories. There are a lot of books that will give you those stories. And we like those books. They are good books. The world needs those books.

This is not that book.

Steel thyself for what follows: horrific latrine stories that span the globe, goat eyeballs, pickpockets, large animals that seemed scary, and smaller organisms that were infinitely more damaging. We have stories that will make you wince. Stories that will make you giggle. Stories that will cause you to question the very nature of the cosmos.

Okay, maybe that was stretching it. Nevertheless, good luck over the upcoming journey, but don't thank us, thank our writers. We received a lot of good work that wouldn't fit, but these folks distinguished themselves with something unique that demanded inclusion. Sometimes it was the whimsy. Sometimes it was the wisdom. Sometimes it was arson in the name of hygiene. Enjoy.

—*Your Friendly Editors*

**THE PRICE OF
DOING BUSINESS**

Finger Food

by Jerry D. Loudenback

My personal theory is that God finished up the world late on the sixth day, and Afghanistan got slapped together to meet His “and on the seventh day He rested” deadline. He just simply ran out of time and materials; after the purple mountain majesty and the amber waves of grain, the fjords, the Mediterranean, the Amazon River basin, there just wasn’t a whole lot left to work with.

* * *

Bleached and barren desert broke right up against the Hindu Kush mountains, with a few fertile valleys casually tossed in here and there like insincere apologies. That was pretty much the landscape and the landscape’s attitude. Afghanistan was one of the most desperate places on earth in which to try to eke out a living: an almost subsistence livelihood, even in the best of times.

And I arrived in the worst of times, when Afghanistan was in the seventh year of a drought. People were starving to death, or if not to death, to

the closest thing—like twelve-year-old Ahmed, whose father cut his nose off so he could make a living as a beggar. Afghanistan wasn't very charming, or comfortable, but it was contagious.

I was there to teach English, having joined the Peace Corps to track down some adventure, and hopefully do some good along the way. So it was rather disheartening to teach the future tense to a class that didn't have much of a future to speak of. Both literally—the Farsi language had no future tense—and figuratively, as time and a twenty-year war would tell. But after I settled into the boundaries of the past continuous tense, I stopped expecting so much.

As the drought continued and the crisis loomed, the United Nations stepped in with the present tense: all able-bodied, male Peace Corps Volunteers were requisitioned to lead “food caravans” to remote areas inaccessible by truck. They warned us of dust and heat, the pissing and moaning of camels ten hours a day, amoebic dysentery—every Volunteer's most intimate traveling companion—bedbugs, bread and tea three times a day, and the threat of bandits (real bandits!). It was exhilarating news—the stuff of adventure—and what I had hoped for. And it sure beat the hell out of modals: “should haves,” “could haves” and “wish I would haves.”

Paired with an Afghan counterpart, Hasan, I was responsible for a guide, a cook, three guards with 1880-era matchlock muskets, eleven camels, a donkey and around three tons of UN wheat. Riding the donkey bareback, with my feet dragging the ground, wrapped up in a turban and the loose-fitting Afghan

“pajamas,” I envisioned myself as Lawrence of Arabia, or, loosely translated, a Don Quixotic, Jerence of Afghanistan.

Our goal was two villages a day, as time, distance and amoebic dysentery permitted. We arrived in a village to great occasion, as we brought an event, some gossip and a chance against the winter. After lengthy greetings and thanks, and negotiations with the landlords for their ten percent cut of the wheat distribution, we unloaded half a camel, set up the scales and books, then weighed out 20 kilograms of wheat to each “head of household.” With help from extended family, the village and a little luck—or the absence of worse luck—this was enough wheat to keep six members of a family of seven alive through the winter.

On the second day out, right on schedule at Tal-i-mirghazi, a small village of around two hundred just inside the Hindu Kush, we finished up the wheat distribution just before midday, had the camels repacked and were saying our final *‘bamonā xodabs.’* But nothing moved very fast in Afghanistan—nowhere to go really, so why hurry—and the *malek*, the village chieftain, insisted we stay for lunch. The invitation could not be refused, of course, either in good manners or in good conscience, so Hasan and I set aside our culturally insensitive timeline and sat down to enjoy edible hospitality.

Hasan and I took our positions of honor, cross-legged on cushions, at the head of the circle, amongst twenty village elders. After some chit-chat, the

servants brought in a copper pitcher and a tin basin for hand washing. As the ritual made its way around the circle, the *malek* began what must have been an eloquent and moving tribute. With intense concentration, I picked up maybe one-third of what he was saying, Hasan, with limited English, translated another third, and the remaining third—well, who knows.

The *malek* went on and on, as the custom dictated, and it took all of my concentration to keep up, so I didn't notice the vat that the servants had placed in front of us until my nose caught a rumor of something, and my eyes watered up in sympathy. Whatever it was, it had very poor personal hygiene.

And, then, with a flourish, the servants lifted the lid from the vat and revealed...a head. Goat's head soup. A skull, in essence: skinned, muscle and cartilage, tendons, brains (I think) floating out of the neck cavity. And those cooked, dead goat eyes staring me down.

Simultaneously with this intimate eye contact, my Midwestern stomach began a frantic dialogue with my "well-you-wanted-an-adventure-now-didn't-you?" brain.

"I ain't eatin' this."

"You've got to or you'll insult the malek and his elders."

"No way, I'm already starting with the dry heaves."

"These are poor people, Jerence ol' boy, and they slaughtered a goat in your honor."

"Yeah, well, maybe so but—good God, there's something in the damn thing's nose!"

A sudden silence interrupted the bickering. The *malek* had finished up his eulogy, and twenty pairs of eyes, with twenty proud smiles underneath, were eagerly waiting for something. From me. This being a diplomatic circle and all, I offered in appreciation all of the kind words I could find, but I was uneasy; very uneasy when the *malek* responded. I leaned over to Hasan for a translation, and he explained, “It is the custom in my country that the honored guest has the privilege of eating the eye.”

The rivalry between stomach and brain escalated into an ugly confrontation.

“You got to be fucking kidding.”

“Nope, this is serious diplomacy here, Jerence, cross-cultural adjustment, I think they call it.”

“Look, I shouldn’t have to do this, what with my dysentery and all.”

“Be good for you—hell, it’ll probably kill off the amoebae.”

“But, man, it smells bad, it looks bad, and you just know it’s gonna taste really, really bad!”

There wasn’t any choice really; it had to be done. Using my thumb and two fingers—all matters of cuisine are finger food in Afghanistan—I dug out an eye (it came out of the socket more easily than I had expected—the eye muscles were a little overcooked), shoveled it into my mouth, bit into it twice—once to kill it and again to make sure—and swallowed everything in one gulp of coagulated, jellied mucous.

I immediately began, very loudly and very quickly, to thank the *malek*, his elders, the village, the state of Badakshan, the proud country of Afghanistan, Allah

and Mohammed, for this very great honor, of which my father back in the U.S. would be so proud, and that I would tell my sons and their sons, and they would tell their sons, about this great occasion and this hospitable village of Tal-i-mir-ghaz. The speech gave me time to lock down my throat, but the coagulated, jellied mucous was on the move, crawling, ever so slowly, down my esophagus. My stomach tried to make itself really, really small, as my intestines grumbled with anticipation.

But no one said a word. The silence again: the twenty pairs of eyes, the smiles, they were insatiable. Things were getting ominous. Hasan came to my rescue and explained the situation, ever so gently, with a shitty little smirk on his face. "In my country, it is unlucky to eat only one eye."

Chasing Amoebas

by Amanda Noble

I've been so lucky in the Philippines. Until now.

A year and a half into my stay, I'm suddenly overcome by what seemed to afflict everyone else from day one. "Amoebic dysentery," they whisper, when you ask how they've grown so thin. "I can't seem to shake it."

Meanwhile I eat everything, and in settings I can't believe I'd frequent. Now, I keep telling myself I don't have it; that stress is setting off this gut trouble. Unbearable stress, really. And these explosions won't stop; cramps, doubling over in pain, the wet brown streams of shit, even when I've had nothing, literally nothing to eat.

Okay, I'll need to go see Dr. Solia; he's the official Peace Corps doctor for Northern Luzon Volunteers, which means he's who we have to turn to when we're ill. Dr. Solia is in heaven with so many female Volunteers knocking at his door, all of us nutrition educators. You go see him for a cold, he insists on a breast check. You go see him for some skin ailment, he insists on a breast check. You go see him for...well, anything at all, and he wants to look at and feel your breasts.

Contributor's biographies

DANIAL ADKISON served in Gabon from 1997 to 2000. He lives in New York City.

LAURENCE BUDD served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines (1979-80). He now lives in Fort Collins, Colorado where he runs Urban Water Conservation LLC consulting business and edits the magazine Water Efficiency.

JOSHUA BERMAN (Nicaragua 1998-2000) is a freelance writer and award-winning guidebook author for *Avalon Travel Publishing's Moon Handbook* and *Living Abroad In* series. His work has been published in *Yoga Journal*, *the Boston Globe*, *Transitions Abroad*, and *Outside Traveler*. His website is www.stonegrooves.net.

HEATHER B. CARROLL (Russia, 2000-2001) is currently pursuing her PhD in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin. She lives with her husband, Joe, and two daughters, Siobhan and Niamh.

J.K. DANE worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 1994-1996. She is a writer of fiction and essays. She lives with her husband and three children in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

JOHN W. EVANS was the first Peace Corps volunteer to live and work in Tangail, Bangladesh. His poems appear in print in *Best New Poets 2006*, *5AM*, *Poetry East*, *Nimrod*, *Alimentum*, *Epicenter*, and *Harpur Palate*, and online at *Slurve*, *Stirring*, *Front Porch* and *Opium*. He teaches at a public high school in Bucharest, Romania.

JAKE FAWSON was born and raised in the southern Utah desert surrounded by a hoard of siblings and a few goats. He currently lives and drinks in New Orleans. As Peace Corps Volunteers (2000-2002), Jake and his

wife Sarah managed the early development of an eco-tourism project in Gabon's Lope National Park.

DEBBY HANGBE served in Benin as an English teacher from 2002-2004. There, she found the ultimate souvenir, her husband (yes, he hates it when she says that). They live together in Rochester, Minnesota, where she avoids spending time in nature and never uses a latrine.

BETSY L. HOWELL is a freelance writer and wildlife biologist for U.S. Forest Service on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. Her essays have appeared in the *Oregonian*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *South Loop Review*, the anthology, *Back Road to Crazy, Stories From The Field* (University of Utah Press, 2005) and two online journals, *Women in Natural Resources* and *The Apple Valley Review*. Her memoir, *Acoustic Shadows, Men at War and a Daughter Who Remembers Them* has recently been published (April 2007) by Rainforest Press. She lives in Port Townsend.

NOAH JACKSON served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines and is a working photographer based in Missoula, Montana. His work focuses primarily on conservation stories that occur along the edges of communities and forests. Some bodies of work include Forest Users in the Philippines, Community Restoration, Organic Farmers, Haitian Refugees and Watersheds. All of his Montana-based work is carbon neutral and proceeds from his work go toward helping organizations with fundraising and groundwork. He can be contacted at jackson.noah@gmail.com.

RODERICK JONES is an epidemiologist in Chicago, where he investigates outbreaks of infectious disease. He served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nicaragua during 1992-1996, and is a frequent contributor to *Backstreets: The Boss Magazine*.

JOHN KRAUSKOPF was a Peace Corps Volunteer and volunteer trainer in the desert region of Iran in the 1960s. He as recently retired from a career in intercultural communication and has written articles and reviews for the Peace Corps Writers web magazine and published stories about his railroading hobby in *Trains* magazine. He is also devoting much volunteer time to the Western Railway Museum, which provides a living history experience in Solano County, California. John's current writing project is an anecdotal history of a Michigan resort community.

JERRY D. LOUDENBACK served in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan as a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) Teacher Volunteer and volunteer trainer from 1972-74. He went on to work in the private sector for a company serving foreign students where he was highly respected as an educator in the many roles he played—educational manager, trainer, boss, youth coach, community volunteer, parent. An engaging storyteller, he brought his tales of travel and Peace Corps experience home. In 1998, he retired and abandoned the memos, training manuals and newsletter articles of the corporate world to write the stories that had long entertained family and friends. Unfortunately, that dream was never realized due to a cancer diagnosis that claimed his life in 2002. *Finger Food* is his first published story.

STEVE MCNUTT served in Gabon from 2000 to 2002. He received his M.F.A. in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Iowa where he was a post-graduate fellow with the International Writing Program. Currently, he's pursuing a Ph.D. in Language, Literacy and Culture, also at Iowa. His work has appeared in *Lost* magazine, the *Des Moines Register*, the *Morning News*, the *Columbia Review* and on National Public Radio's *Weekend America: Iowa Edition*. One of his essays was a finalist for *The Florida Review's* 2006 Nonfiction Prize. The next time Jake Fawson contacts him with an

idea for a "quick project" he vows to leave the country and leave no forwarding address

AMANDA NOBLE lives and writes in Davis, California. She is hard at work on a memoir of her Peace Corps experience in The Philippines.

RICH SITLER graduated from Blackburn College in Carlinville, Illinois with B.A. in History and has attended Salt Center for Documentary Studies and Ohio University's School of Visual Communication. He has worked as a photojournalist for several newspapers and served in Jamaica as a Volunteer from 2000 to 2002, returning in 2006 with Crisis Corps. Currently, he is working on a photographic documentary of Peace Corps Volunteers working in the field. The project is scheduled for completion prior to the organization's 50th anniversary.

BILL THOMAS was a Volunteer in Fiji from 1970 through 1972, teaching elementary school on one of the hundred-plus inhabited islands in the group. He now lives in Rochester, New York, where he works with students who have special needs. In his spare time he writes children's books.

JETT THOMASON served in Uzbekistan as an English teacher from 2002-2004. Immediately after his service, he spent two years working for the man in Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, Jett has succumbed to grad school peer pressure and will be getting back to his idealistic roots by studying international development policy at Georgetown.

TOM WELLER served as a Peace Corps rural water and sanitation extension agent in Beinamar, Chad, from 1993 to 1995. He currently lives in Greencastle, Indiana, and teaches at Indiana State University, where he is the student support services writing specialist.

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