
EXCLUSIVE: PHIL'S DIARIES

Excerpts from his eagerly anticipated new travel book *'Live your dream, don't dream your life'*. A lecture tour is sure to follow.

Friday 1st June 2001 Travels in a distant land

In the early hours of today I arrived in Christchurch, New Zealand. Now a full 11 hours ahead of the UK. Winter has settled here now. The snow covered alpine chain of the Arthur range rise high up in the distance. Another sunny day beckons. I think in the last update I'd returned from Antarctica and had completed a couple of 8/9 day treks in the Patagonian regions of Chile and Argentina. So that takes me into early February.

After that I headed up through the Patagonian Steppe. Very similar to desert but with just a little bit more vegetation. Amazing open landscapes stretching to infinity with spindly green vegetation and azure blue skies. Mountains rose to those blue skies in a mix of photogenic sheer cliffs, open dusty brown and green slopes, the rocks - some grey, some red always changing. Lizards and snakes basked in the bright blinding sun. Scuttling away at your approach. Some snakes crossed in front of your path with out so much as a look at you. No more than 1 or 2 feet away. It is here that I encountered the Argentinian Cowboy or Gaucho. Looking every bit the part. Dust encrusted leather hide over trousers, shirt colours faded in the sun, sun baked faces lined with a thousand stories past. I joined them on an Estancia (close to the Spanish for "you stay" an apt term). These are the ranches of the country, with vast tracts of land under their control. We rode our horses, western style out into the mountains. My horse had two modes, stationary or galloping like the wind! Encountering some wild horses I got involved in trying to catch them. We succeeded but I ended up holding onto my saddle for dear life at one point. Under the brim of my french foreign legion hat with Aztec patterns I squinted. Eyes focused on the middle distance. Am I on a film set? No it is real!

Later we returned to the Estancia and drank wine and ate fresh beef, cooked over an open fire. Sad songs about lost loves and those who went missing at the hands of the government in the 80s were sung.

You would have been a hard hearted soul not to weep a little.

Beyond Patagonia it was onto the Argentinian Lake District. Here I encountered rock painting dating to over 5000 years ago. Simple paintings, perhaps I could achieve the same with some Oche. Nevertheless to see these artifacts doodled onto a rock wall by a bored Neanderthal teenager is a powerful image. It struck at the heart in unexpected ways. As I headed north the landscapes gradually evolved.



Iguaza Falls

The vegetation becoming more lush, grass you would recognise in England making an appearance in the middle latitudes of these countries. Further north the vegetation turned to a lush sub tropical variety. The colours still change, soil, plants, trees acting like chameleons all the while. Eventually the chameleons becoming new species.

I reached the Missions Province in the north east of Argentina. The soil has turned to a clay red and palm trees and umbrellas trees abound. Vines that Tarzan would have been proud of fill in all the gaps. The light drops incredibly in the midst of this sub tropical rain forest. The mini camera tripod I carry needs to be used even in the middle of the day.

I reach the border of Paraguay. I have already visited the ruins of some Jesuit ruins on the Argentinian side. Some being reclaimed by the jungle. I wish to see more. Did I mention that I hadn't encountered another traveller or tourist for the past 4

weeks at this point. I had been an object of great curiosity in all this time. Who was this stranger, from a strange land in our midst? How did he come to have that blonde hair and unnatural height. He spoke with a strange accent, but he spoke our language. He wrote in a strange hand we didn't understand. What did it matter? He was friendly towards us and shared his stories of travel and home as we shared ours. He made us laugh as we made him laugh. He was a good man. May his travels be safe.

Suerte (Spanish for luck)

According to foreign office sites and guidebooks I read subsequently. You need a visa to enter Paraguay. Well I got in without too much fuss. I was the only person who had to get off the bus for Argentinian exits customs mind. A nice chat and back on the next bus. Back off for Paraguayan migration control. A further stamp in the passport (one of hundreds) and on into Encarnacion. Guess he hadn't heard about the visa thing.

Did I mention I was travelling round South America mainly using a 1:4,000,000 scale map. In the major towns there would be a turismo office to get more local information or a map of the area. Served me well with no need for additional guidebooks.

In Paraguay I visited a number of Jesuit ruins, some remarkably intact after the wars between the Jesuits and natives against the Spanish and Portuguese invaders. Paraguay is also a rich botanical

wonderland. Exotic and tropical birds abound and just a casual walk in the jungle would bring many encounters. Some weren't shy coming up to peck me or the lens of my camera. Many quite special waterfalls hid their charms in the foliage, quietly revealing themselves, as you brushed the greenery away.

I also went to see Jesus. No not Him. But one of the Jesuit ruins was at a place called Jesus. I'd caught bus to the Trinidad ruins. Here I'd encountered thousands of Giant Blue Butterflies. At least 20 or 30 passing every second. I'd seen a sign to Jesus down a side road. (For that read red clay track that you wouldn't want to mountain bike down). I'd found a shady spot and waited for transport. After 1.5 hours a truck had come by and standing holding on at the back bounced my way down to the ruins. All the while Mate, a Paraguayan herbal tea was being passed round. Don't ask what the herbs were, but everyone was veeeeeeery chiiiiiiilled.

Getting a different lift back I was dropped back on the road at Trinidad. I sat in the shade at the road junction with an army man in fatigues. A pretty powerful piece of weaponry over his shoulder. He shared his mate and we had a pleasant couple of hours talking before a bus turned up. Paraguay was so chilled. I loved it, be it in cantinas, bars or at the side of road, chatting and observing daily life whilst waiting for transport.

I crossed from Paraguay to Brazil with what turned out to be a group of smugglers. It was a bazaar border crossing and immigration was so pre-occupied with my companions that they ignored me. No passport check or stamp. I wasn't sure if this would cause a problem on exiting Brazil, but it was too late now. From there I travelled to Foz de Iguazu and Igauzu Falls. Easily to find on any world map. This is where the borders of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina meet.

Iguazu Falls pump water over 80m cliffs, 3 kms across, at a rate of 3.5 million gallons a second. Rainbows danced across the resulting mist. If sailors are going to sail off the edge of the earth then surely this was it. On the Brazilian side you get the overall view. Crossing to the Argentinian side I got the close up. Wet doesn't begin to describe it. A boat ride above the falls with the deafening sound growing ever louder as we drew closer. Was the outboard good enough? Just! A humbling experience.

I'd also entered Argentina without an entry stamp. I'd tried to get one. But when he

saw the number of stamps I had (Crossing the Argentinian border 8 times already), he threw up his hands and waved me on. In fact I'd entered and exited Brazil with no stamps all in my passport. This proved a problem when trying to get the bus to Beunos Aires a few days later. The police were checking identity papers etc. I had no valid entry stamp in my passport, and so he wouldn't let me on. With 15 minutes to spare this needed a solution. So I took a taxi back to the border with Brazil. The first and only time I'd actually asked a taxi to go faster in South America. He thought I was crazy. "Esta loco". Approaching the border from the wrong direction the guards watched me approach. I asked for and got a new entry stamp for Argentina. I think they also thought I was crazy. Back to the town and bus with 2 minutes to spare. Pheeeeew.

A week chilling in Beunos Aires, eating outside many of the street cafes, late night visits to Tango Bars, and a trip to the Recolecta Cemetary to see Eva Perons (Evita) grave and also many of those of the Presidents of Argentina. It just tipped it down in Beunos Aires. So I didn't bother with a day trip across the Uruguay on the otherside of the wide river.

In all my writing of South America I have hardly mentioned the guns and rifles at all. It seems strange now that I haven't done this, considering the frequency of these events. In every country I would daily pass through checkpoints, army or police. Weapons would be casually be on show. It became a part of my everyday travels. It was no more worrying than encountering a banana skin on a pavement back home. A natural thing. I reckon if you dropped me back into those countries blindfold I could tell where I was just from the weapons. A flight to Sydney, Australia on the 23rd March ended my South American leg. A dynamic, exciting leg of my round the world that included a trip to Antarctica. A journey of great contrast and suprise. Always a friendly if somewhat curious welcome. The more remote, the less travelled road, providing the greater and more rewarding experience.

How did Australia compare? Dramatically different. But for tales of my Australian leg you'll have to wait.

As for tales to come I have now worked out the Asia and Africa and Europe legs, the final parts of the story. A brief summary is as follows.

From New Zealand to Japan in mid July. In early August onto Hong Kong and into

China. Mid September to early October a mountain bike ride over the Himalayas from Tibet to Nepal. October through November overland from Kathmandu, Nepal to Delhi, India. Early December through to mid / late January overland from Nairobi, Kenya to Cape Town, South Africa. This will be my 7th continent visited and 6th of this journey. In and Mid to late January a flight from Cape Town to Madrid, Spain. The 7th continent of the trip and home. Late January onwards the journey home via Paris, France and Calais - Dover ferry.

You can tell he much of an impact a place has by how many memories of the little things you recall months or years later. All the above has been written from memory. It is but a small sample of my experiences. A summary.

The diaries stretch on as far as those desert landscapes. The soul rises as high as the Andes and Himalayas. The heart beats as slow as the movement of the continents. The eyes are as wide as the Grand Canyon. Their focus is on the stars and heavens above. The spine shivers as though I'm still swimming with those Antarctic ice bergs. Life is good and still the journey continues in ways far greater than I imagined...

Take care and live your dreams, even if only for a while...

Sunday 29th July 2001

Pull the other one it's got bells on

Just a week short of a years travel. Another brief update on my travels. Just covering a day this time. But what a magical wonderous mountain day it was. I think I'm too far behind on updates for you to catch up now. Australia and New Zealand are worthy of a few pages of updates. So is Japan. For now they'll have to sit within my diaries, log book, photos, heart and head. Alas I think you'll have to wait till the HMC requests a slideshow for some of the stories. Assuming the HMC is interested! I have been taking slides of the whole trip so far and intend to continue doing so for the remaining 6 months of China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Africa then finally a brief spell in Europe and home. How many slides is that? Yesterday I climbed Mt Fuji the highest mountain in Japan at 3776m. Respectable by European alpine standards. I started

climbing about 12.30pm yesterday. The sky was just solid cloud so I wasn't hopeful.

The summit of Fuji was not visible.

Apparently the 'correct' way to climb Fuji is to ascend to a hut high on the mountain in the afternoon, acclimatise / stay the night. Then you rise early (3.00am) and climb to the summit for sunrise. Sure enough the Japanese like to do things right. (Really nice people - go out of their way to help you). So there they were all climbing up the mountain in the afternoon. I don't know how many there were but it's estimated 3,000 a day make the attempt on Fuji during the "season" (1st July - 31st August).

They also all had these massive wooden staffs with bells on. It was like walking up a mountain with a thousand alpine cows! The staffs were branded as they reached each hut (station) - to prove they'd actually climbed that far I suppose. As we climbed higher the clouds dropped below us and Fuji revealed itself. Climbing high above the clouds is one of those fantastically sublime experiences that happen all too rarely. In the UK it's often as not climbing in the clouds!

As I was beginning to wonder what the summit would actually be like with all these hordes of locals and the bells around they began to thin out! Luckily they were doing everything right and as they reached the huts they stopped to stay the night. They would see the sunrise from the summit.

I continued on as the summit was clear at the present time. Clouds could descend in the night and dampen any sunrise the next day. Besides I don't like getting up at 3.00am. Who does?

Acclimatisation - well I'd been upto 2,600m in New Zealand 3 weeks ago - but that doesn't really count does it. An ascent after sleeping at 500m above sea level - let's ignore the rules!

So I reached the crater rim, Fuji being an old Volcano, at 5.00pm. I wandered around the rim to the actual summit on the south western edge, which took about an 3/4 hour. I then found a spot looking west and watched the sun slowly set. It was a wonderous sight with the clouds far below lit up yellow then orange, red, pink, purple and close by the reddish brown volcanic rocks glowing in the soft evening light. Shortly after 7.00pm the sun was then gone and with it the clouds gradually turned grey then dark grey as the light faded. The sky above turned a kind of green before it finally darkened and turned black and into night. Amazingly I had this

spot on the crater rim to myself. Hardly anyone was actually on the summit for sunset. I saw about 5 others on the opposite side of the crater. No more. The Japanese were doing it right and were staying in the huts below. Even other Gaijin (foreigners) were absent. Blame Lonely Planet. It says the best time to be on the summit is sunrise as the likelihood of being cloud free is best then.

I then descended in the dark by torchlight. Another worthy experience with the lights of Kawaguchi-ko (ko means lake in Japanese) on the side of the lake far below poking through gaps now appearing in the clouds. I was the only one descending for the first 1.5 hours that night. I still had the mountain to myself. Alone in my thoughts. Only the mountain talked. Beautiful and silent. Shortly before the 6th station (hut) down the mountain I came across a group of 15 with 2 torches! Not suprisingly they were lost and they latched onto me as a ship in a storm heads to harbour. I managed to shake them off after pointing them in the right direction. They were trying to go up the mountain! I had the last bus back into town to catch. At 22.10 I caught that bus as a procession of torchlights headed up the mountain for sunrise. A pilgrimage of sorts. Lots of foreigners were in that procession. I hope the sunrise was as good as the sunset. But for them I think it will have been a little more crowded. If only they knew! Magic times abound!

Saturday 25th August

Hard Core Travelling

Here are a couple of extracts from my journals of China. If you are at work and wish you weren't - something to escape with. If you are away and in the third world then something to be printed off and used as emergency toilet paper! If you are retired and thinking you can't afford a new car. Read on...

1. Do you believe in Karma?

I've just come out of 7 days and over 1000km of rough dirt road travelling. Generally climbing over a number of passes over 4000 metres. This is all on the borders between Western Sichuan, China and Tibet. Absolutely stunning scenery and mainly Tibetan people, monks, nomadic herdsman, and Chinese minority groups on the 4000m plains, starting about 500km from Tibets border. Climbed a couple of

5000m + peaks. I seem to acclimatise very quickly and am extremely fit at present. But then I need to be.

Met a few corrupt bus tickets sellers who wouldn't sell us (foreigners) tickets. Preferring to sell to the locals first. The experience of over a years travel and the "you will give me the ticket" stubbornness won though in the end. Today I was subject to one of the locals sitting next to me pulling a scam. The ticket collector was checking tickets before we set off on the 7am bus to Zhongdian, my present location. I handed my ticket to the inspector at the same time as the guy next to me. But the guy next to me gave the inspector a duff ticket valid from a different location for yesterday. When questioned he swapped his ticket with mine in the instant before I looked back up to see what the fuss was. I was taken off the bus. I insisted the bus driver came with me. It had taken 3 days of hard work to get this valuable ticket. The bus would not go without me. I was busy arguing in the ticket office with the lady who sold me the ticket. In English but with all the right body language and intonation in the voice. So she could guess what I was saying even if she didn't understand. I then looked the ticket and realised it had been switched. Motioning with my hands what must have happened we went back to the bus. The inspector found my original ticket on the guy next to me and I reclaimed my seat. (I tend to write my name on the back of my tickets) The guy next to me kept very quiet. They would lose face if he left and the Westerner stayed. This bus was not leaving without me! Shortly after we set off the scam guy got a quite serious nose bleed. Everybody accused me of punching him in the nose. Alas the thought hadn't crossed my mind. After all he was just poor and trying to get by as best he could. Do you believe in Karma - If I didn't before I do now! Now I am back to regular buses (at least one a day!) and hopefully no more corrupt ticket sellers. Hopefully tarmac from now on as well. I am out of the landslide territory and the most difficult part of my China travels. Here in Zhongdian you can even get banana pancakes. A treat after the past few rough days. No showers during this period just basins of cold water and a ladle to pour it over my head. Here we can have hot showers after 7.00pm another luxury I will partake of.

2. Hard Core (seat) travelling

(Extract from 31 hour train journey on a

hard seat in China)

Turns out my ticket was a reserved hard seat not a reserved hard sleeper. Now I know why the ticket was cheaper than I was expecting. Phrase books - who needs them!

There have been degrees of comfort on my travels in the world. Economy class flights, bullet trains, normal trains, commuter trains, luxury sleeper buses, passable buses, rattly buses, should have retired buses, trucks, cars, 4WD, bikes, on foot, horse, dinghy, rowing boat, ferry, Russian ice breaking ships, subways, swimming... on land, sea, air etc. Normally the type of transport is appropriate either for the terrain or the length of journey.

How does the Chinese hard seat train journey compare? Well for a start the word hard comes into a new category all of itself. I think they have invented a new substance Nasa needs to know about. Sitting on a bed of nails would have been more pleasant. Will this be a class of seat on India's trains? "Bed of nails to see the Buddha please".... "Yes return thanks" How can they improve the experience? Lets put a low table in front of the seat that a tall westerners knees barely fit under. Try and cram as many chinese onto the seats next to him. Tell everybody to light a cigarette. Throw rubbish on the floor near me or out of the window further up the train. Some of it coming back in via my window. Keep adding more people at stations further down the line. Despite the fact that the train is already packed more solidly than a Tokyo subway train at rush hour. To top it all have people constantly moving up and down the aisles trying to sell you food and various other items disturbing everyone and causing 0.5 billion people to try out either my left or right knee for comfort.

Which they seemed to like! Make sure the children try and pull the hairs off my legs. How do we add to this and try and ensure he has a train journey of a lifetime? Make the train take 31 hours instead the promised 20. This guy would love to arrive in a strange new city just before midnight. Oh! and make sure the toilets are as blocked as a congested nose (which would have helped!). Have various bags fall on him whilst he tries to sleep during the night section. When getting on the train at 3am shout as loudly as you can to the person standing next to you. If that fails turn on your stereo as loud as possible. I'm sure he doesn't really want to sleep.

Actually the trip wasn't so bad. I made friends with the people around me fairly

easily. The usual badly spoken chinese from my phrase book got them all laughing. Most people seem to want me to have as pleasant a time as possible. They see the solo westerner where they don't expect you to be - hard seat this time. So they want to help you and make you comfortable (as is possible!). I think they feel that if I have a bad impression of China then it reflects upon them.

A few black handed (pick pockets / thief types) people were on the train. But they don't seem to be very good at it. Everybody stares at you. Natural curiosity at the tall blonde alien. But some take too keen an interest. I can spot them pretty easily these days even in a crowd of 1 billion. With the black handers I quite openly acknowledge their stares. Even say hello to them at times. Mostly to unnerve them and get them a little off their stride. It's so obvious I know they are there. Maybe that's why I have yet to have problems of the thieving sort.

This is course is probably one of the most tiring aspects of third world travel. Keeping



Phil's heavy disguise for border crossing

alert and steering clear of trouble. Bit of an old hand at this now though I suppose. Yes China, certainly in the south west, has a lot of developing to do.

So I arrived in Guilin train station just before midnight. I left my seat to get my large backpack off the overhead rack. A gigantic scramble ensued for the seat. A third of the population of China wanted it. Many of them still had another 30 hours of luxury travel to get to Ghanzhou!

A woman who had tried to get my seat before I'd really got out of it was hit by my pack. What a shame! Well if she can't wait until I've at least got into the aisle. The backpack was my weapon for leaving the train. Swinging it methodically like a club or

a medieval mace I swept people aside in my quest for the door. The rest of China was trying to come through that door. But I swept them back in my desire to find a bed and escape from the most comfortable 31 hours in my life!

As soon as I hit the streets the touts were out and about trying to get me to stay at this or that hotel or use their taxi. The hotel touts actually saved me a walk to the place I planned to go to. They started off at a ridiculous 200 Yuan for a bed in a dorm. By the time I'd walked less than 400m and followed my usual routine of telling them they were too expensive or ignoring them I got a single room for 42 yuan with attached shower and toilet. (Approx 13 Yuan to the Pound) I had a cold shower and a shave. The first (cold one that is!) since my travels in Paraguay, Brazil and last days in Argentina in February / March. Bliss after 31 hours in the heat and smoke of the train. Then I lay on my bed and fell into a deep and much needed sleep.

Next day I caught a bus down to Yangshou. It is more leisurely here. A much

smaller place. A small town compared to a big city. It feels much more laid back. A nice place to relax, drink the beer, enjoy the food and cycle to the villages / through the rice paddies, or take a ride on a villagers boat through the karst landscape before heading back to HK in a week for the flights onto Lhasa, Tibet and the bike ride to Kathmandu, Nepal.