Vietnam Revisited ... And Yes, You Can Go “Home” Again

by Morton I. Katz

“Stop!” I yelled.

I had been vacantly staring out the van’s windshield, not really focusing on the sights, just resting tired eyes after a long day of touring. We were eager to get back to our hotel in the city that a government had renamed after Ho Chi Minh (but to my mind would forever remain Saigon), in anticipation of revitalizing showers before dinner. Our guide had just expressed concern that if we did not hurry, we would encounter the city’s famously impenetrable rush-hour traffic, and the driver had picked up the pace. My wife Sally was nodding off.

It had been a day of both disappointments and pleasant surprises. We had crawled through the Cu Chi tunnels earlier that morning, but the experience elicited no remembrance in me of the incessantly monsoon-drenched peanut field at Cu Chi that was my duty station for the first eight months of my year-long tour. On the other hand, the amazing Cao Dai Temple ceremony in Tay Ninh had been beyond our expectations. My last unfinished business that day was attempting to locate my other home, for the last four
months I spent “in-country.” That base camp had been situated on an abandoned Michelin rubber plantation 40 kilometers northwest of Saigon, next to the village of Dau Tieng, south and east of Tay Ninh, and near the Cambodian border.

My goal to reconnect with the past became a personal challenge for our Vietnamese guide. We studied maps together and he asked directions of some older locals. We found a several-city-blocks-long paved surface that might have been the French planters’ airstrip my tent had adjoined, but I could not be sure whether it was a runway or just a road in disrepair. As the shadows lengthened and our fatigue weighed more heavily upon us, the improbability of a successful outcome caused me to throw up my hands and call off the quest. It was unrealistic for me to expect that a French villa located near the two-man tent I shared with Tom Simes would remain standing after so many years, or that the villa would somehow be visible to me as we drove from Tay Ninh to Saigon. It had been totally secluded in 1967, amongst oozing rubber trees and flowering bougainvillea, and some distance from any roads.

And so it was a miracle that my peripheral vision had caught the blur of a modernistic, whitewashed shape as we sped down the highway, or that the sight of it had triggered a memory locked in my foggy, half-asleep brain. I had, after all, been looking for something entirely different—a beige villa with ochre-colored, half-round roof tiles—but somehow in that split-second I made a connection.

“Stop!” I yelled excitedly. “I swear that looks like the Michelin plantation’s swimming pool.” An instant later I was already doubting myself, but the driver had braked and pulled over. Vietnamese children were running up the spiral stairs of the Art Deco-like building in swimming attire. We followed them up the steps of the swimming pool (it was constructed above ground, so you entered the water from the second floor). And there I had my confirmation, seeing the unique cast-concrete diving platform with its own spiral staircase extending over the deep water and the separate shallow section. I knew I was home. Back in January of 1967, the Fourth Infantry command decided to clean out the muck-filled pool that the French had long since abandoned, to restore it for our soldiers’ use. The pool was reconditioned and became a pleasant diversion for the troops. It should not have created such an indelible memory in me, since I swam in it only once. I recalled taking photographs of the structure after my swim, having been intrigued by its incongruity: a swimming pool within a forest of rubber trees, in a combat zone.

As I stared at this memory come to life, my first impulse was to marvel. That the concrete—poured to construct an amusement for privileged French colonials and abandoned by them after their French-Indochina War was lost—had survived intact was remarkable. And that this oddly out-of-place building would have a second life in another protracted civil war, and then a third life, bringing pleasure to the Vietnamese great-great-grandchildren of those conflicts, seemed ironic. With so much pain and so many losses on both sides, that something as ordinary as a swimming pool could bridge many generations and in a small way help heal the deep wounds—the idea of it left me speechless. Could protagonists from the distant past and their progeny be linked, I wondered? Could time be endlessly looping upon itself and by my returning to this war-torn land, had I somehow crossed the wires? The moment felt bizarre.

Cute Vietnamese children were giggling and horsing around in the cool water, squinting into the setting sun, gazing up at this lanky, old, gray-bearded Caucasian guy with a camera who was having trouble framing his shots through his camera’s viewfinder because his eyes kept tearing up. We exited the pool and crossed the parking lot to a 1960s vintage American Huey helicopter and jeep displayed next to a grouping of bomb shell casings, in front of what we realized was a museum, commemorating the fighting in the area during the French and the American periods. The museum’s exterior sort of reminded me of a French villa, and I wondered if it was, in fact, the one I had been searching for. The people manning the museum were too young to remember the wars. They seemed more curious about us than hostile.

Our last night in Saigon was another reconnection with my past. Sally and I ordered drinks on the rooftop bar of the Rex Hotel—the same bar where a young captain, whenever he could get a weekend pass to Saigon, would cadge a chopper ride or join an
overland convoy from Cu Chi and spend his evenings nursing a drink or two or three on the roof of the Rex’s Bachelor Officer Quarters. I recalled tapping my feet as Vietnamese bands played pop tunes, their doll-faced girl singers in their colorful ao dais, singing American songs they’d memorized. I remember tossing more than a few nickels into the B.O.Q.’s slot machines to pass the time. And I used to lean against the outer railing and stare out at Saigon’s traffic-snarled central square, its government buildings, and stately opera house, and I would wonder how my parents were doing, half a world away.

Memories flooded back. As I looked down upon that same central square, this time in the guise of a tourist, my voice cracked as I struggled to describe to Sally what my impressions had been back then, back in ’66, before we knew each other. It was a vastly different time and I was a very different person. I pointed Sally toward the spot where a large Republic of Vietnam propaganda sign had occupied a prominent place in the central square. It has been replaced by well-manicured gardens and a fountain. Trees have grown, blocking most of the opera house from our view off the Rex. Four- and five-story stucco French colonial buildings that formerly surrounded the square were now dwarfed by sleek skyscrapers, one soaring 66 stories. Street-level mom-and-pop shops and sidewalk vendors cooking on braziers have been supplanted by the most upscale Fifth Avenue-quality boutiques. Muscle-powered pedicabs, bicycles that once competed with American jeeps, and incessantly horn-blaring Citroens were replaced by the cacophony of hundreds of revving motor scooters, their riders wearing masks in a hopeless attempt to avoid breathing the polluted air. Nevertheless, I was back home again, transported into the mindset of a 26-year-old, and reliving the sense of nervous anticipation that I had felt then, for what my future might hold. If I only knew then what I know now.... And now, looking back upon the trip, I am glad that I returned to my home away from home for what was the most pivotal year of my life. I have a sense of closure now that was not afforded me when I finished my tour and rotated back to “The World.” When I left the war, flew across the Pacific, and abruptly reentered the turbulent anti-war United States of 1967, the transition had been too abrupt. Ambivalence about this controversial period in our history never seemed to resolve itself.

Veterans of foreign campaigns may gain closure by making a pilgrimage back to their theatre of war. There is an opportunity to complete the circle, to confront whatever demons one carried out of those experiences, or assuage the guilt that a survivor feels when so many others did not survive. We will continue to honor those who “paid the ultimate price” and those who were not so fortunate as to return to their families whole of body or mind. Some might find it therapeutic to revisit that terrible arena that tested us and changed us so irrevocably, by viewing it now through a softer lens with the passage of time.

Considering the Standards
by Bill Messenger

It’s certainly possible to create brilliant variations on prosaic themes. Witness Mozart’s variations for piano on the little tune usually referred to today as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” But in jazz, the performances with the greatest depth are those in which musicians create variations on melodically substantial and harmonically interesting themes. In such performances, we experience the double pleasure of hearing creative variations on well-crafted songs. Memorable examples include Coleman Hawkins’ variations on “Body and Soul,” Errol Garner’s on his own song “Misty,” and Ella’s unmatched scat choruses on Gershwin’s “Lady Be Good.”

During the late 1920s, jazz musicians, realizing that only a small number of the thousands of songs recorded and published each year were of high quality, began, unceremoniously, to drop the ephemeral from their repertoire and retain the first-rate songs. As this list of hundreds of songs was being accumulated, the musicians began calling this repertoire the “standards.”
(These correspond, in jazz and cabaret music, to the “standard repertoire” in concert music.)

The term is still universally used among jazz musicians, but, unfortunately, it is, for the most part, no longer a part of the non-musician’s vocabulary. As a result, when we look for vocal recordings of these songs in record stores, we won’t find a bin labeled “standards.” Instead, we’ll find the great recordings of Billy Eckstein, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Washington, and others in bins labeled “Easy Listening,” along with nostalgic novelties like “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?”, “Mule Train,” and “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.” The standards deserve better.

The label “Easy Listening” is unfortunate; for one thing, it suggests that everything else is hard to listen to. And the label that began supplementing and/or replacing the “Easy Listening” label during the late 1900s is equally inadequate. That label is “Adult Contemporary;” the music is not contemporary in the usual sense, and the “adult” label makes it sound as if the songs should be X-rated.

“Standards” is a term created by the people who unquestionably knew the difference between music with substance and the simple-minded pap that has always comprised the vast majority of the American Top 40. George Gershwin’s “Someone to Watch Over Me,” Cole Porter’s “Night and Day,” Rodgers and Hart’s “My Funny Valentine,” and Jerome Kern’s “All the Things You Are” are standards. After 75 years, the old standards show no sign of going away. Their harmonies are full of pleasant surprises and their lyrics, honeycombed with rhyme, alliteration, and vivid imagery, somehow still manage to sound spontaneous and conversational.

A fairly typical example of this kind of writing can be seen in Larry Hart’s lyric for the song “I Could Write a Book.” The easy flow of the words perfectly complements the melody. The entire lyric is controlled by the opening statement: “If they asked me, I could write a book,” a cliché that suddenly stops being a cliché because Hart develops the statement uniquely. He loads (almost overloads) the lyric with alliteration and rhyme. The meter is strictly controlled by the melody. Yet (this is the miracle!) when you sing the lyrics, they sound natural. Let’s look at the lyric:

I COULD WRITE A BOOK
If they asked me, I could write a book
The way you walk and whisper and look.
I could write a preface on how we met
That the world would never forget.
And the simple secret of the plot
Is just to tell you that I love you ... a lot.
And the world discovers
As my book ends
How to make two lovers of friends.

The beauty of the standards lies partially in their resilience. They can be slowed down, speeded up, sung in different meters and played by almost any combination of instruments and voices. Many of them, over the decades, have been recorded by hundreds of different artists. Since Hoagy Carmichael’s 1927 Gennett recording of “Star Dust” as a piano solo, the song has been recorded nearly 2000 times.

The standards have, after seven decades of recordings by first-rate artists, elevated themselves from the metier of popular music to the realm of art. The songs are permanently contemporary.

Graduation Day—The Dream is Alive

by Barbara Orbock

It is a gala. The spider web climbing net has been hoisted to ceiling position and the basketball backboards anchor balloons and crepe-paper streamers of blue and white. Across the rear wall of the auditorium a banner stretches from door to door heralding the Pleasant Plains Class of ’97—words and panther mascot framed by interlocked pairs of multi-colored hands. Below it are posted 125 “I Remember” themes penned in various stages of emerging cursive or regressive printing. The room is filled to overflowing with proud and hopeful adults. Some are attired in the ethnic garb of their native countries—
saris, sarongs, turbans. Many others are outfitted in their very best, announcing to the world the importance of this occasion, that for them it ranks up there with weddings, funerals, and bar mitzvahs. Entire rows are filled with extended families and fathers are much in evidence.

This is largely a middle-class gathering, but in attendance also are those who have no best clothes. They sit quietly, seemingly awestruck, as if today may be their first visit to this place of learning. Yet they have put their apprehensions aside to be here. Like all of them, I sit in nervous anticipation of this pre-adolescent rite of passage. I wonder if, like me, they realize that this elementary school graduation may be the last pure glimpse of their precious youngster’s childhood.

Conversation abruptly ceases as Mrs. Bisset and the Recorder Ensemble strike the first notes of “Ode to Joy.” The fifth grade graduates begin their June morning walk in the sun on the way to the night terrors of Middle School. Each of them, including the handful of ADHD upstarts that I know have definitely taken their Ritalin, is focused on making as unobtrusive an entrance as possible. With shy smiles, they march as instructed, eyes ahead, concentrating on the junction of the mid-court stripe and sideline where they are to pivot smartly 90 degrees and continue to the risers.

As they file by, my mind processes what my eye records. With few exceptions the girls are taller than the boys, some by almost a foot. A good half have physically blossomed and most seem somewhat embarrassed, slouching slightly, trying to hide what I guess at this age they would rather not have—legs and arms too long, budding breasts, torsos too heavy, too thin, or otherwise out of proportion, bodily motion out of sync. And no matter how well-dressed, the clothing just doesn’t seem to fit. Only three or four black girls of definite maturity or those still locked in the body of a child walk with assurance. The boys, in contrast, are sure-footed and even those in stiff Sunday suits conquer the aisle with a swagger. A few are on the cusp of puberty, but for most the worry of zits, tripping over one’s feet, and fighting the bizarre crackles of changing voice are at least two years away.

There are no long boring speeches, just delightful, well-rehearsed singing, some expert instrumentals from a handful of talented musicians, and finally the academic, citizenship, and improvement awards. Then each child makes a solo trip across the stage to receive the earned certificate of achievement. Some families stand and applaud, their pride and hope so evident—the old dream of each generation surpassing the last very much alive. I scan the faces of the young again and wonder. Will Gary Saunders and Marcel McCain become jazz saxophonists in the black tradition, will Rhajiv Ratnatunga become a space scientist or a lawyer like his Sri Lankan-born parents? Will Ashley Stearns, the adopted child of a single white woman feel a need to return to her roots in India? Will Munir Mohamud, Arundhati Mohankjumar, and Alexander Shah always find peers as accepting of differences as those they have found in these protective halls? Will Lamar West become the basketball star he aspires to be? Will Precious Brown and Latoya Lewis reach adulthood without becoming pregnant? Will Emily Boone and Hne Youh and Casey O’Brien set the academic world on fire and continue the battle for recognition of women’s talents? Will Andrew, my very bright grandson, remain curious and perceptive and open to the world? Will he and Pat Rostowski remain friends? Will Melissa Scott ever think enough of herself not to hide inside an oversized sweatshirt? Will Willy Wong really learn to read?

Finally each child has his diploma and “The Triumphal March” from Aida comes forth from the piano. The recessional begins and grins break out when the eyes of the child finally meet those of the parent. Even Melissa Scott is smiling. As these innocents pass my seat on their way to food and freedom, I see them as part of a panorama—the changing face of America. The multicultural microcosm of this urban–suburban grade school is really my country in miniature. And because it is, somehow the future for all of us seems a little brighter.
On Writing

By Missy Beattie

I think I’ve got a novel going.
My stream of consciousness is overflowing,
with run-on sentences and dangling phrases,
words are racing off the pages.

At night when I lie in bed,
first sentences crash inside my head,
while developmentally arrested characters plot
to thwart my thoughts with writers’ block.
What if my protagonist loses her honor,
can’t find her voice, confuses the genre,
isn’t creative, doesn’t have vision,
uses clichés, can’t make a decision?

And if my antagonist can’t keep the pace,
has no style, forgets his place,
avoids the rough draft with his point of view,
or uses dialogue that doesn’t move?

What to reveal, where do I go?
Who will star in this picture show?
A child leaving the nest, midlife crisis,
love, illness, loss, and rites of passage?

As one who’s seen the smaller pains,
I have heightened respect for whatever remains.
But all these topics are covered so well.
After Shakespeare, what’s left to tell?

Perhaps, I should try a smaller glory,
a novella, or a shorter story.
A poem that’s incisive, a little perfection,
wrapped up neatly as a baker’s confection.

How ‘bout a doggerel about my cat?
Not even Shakespeare thought of that.
A note, a letter, some communication,
a postcard from an exotic location.

Emily Dickinson, always the recluse,
didn’t use anything as an excuse
to idly while away her time
or compromise for the sake of rhyme.
What to conceal, what to show?
Only write about what you know.
But maybe my thoughts shouldn’t be aired,
shouldn’t be written, shouldn’t be shared.

Shouldn’t be published, wouldn’t be bought,
shouldn’t be whispered, shouldn’t be thought.
If only I could make a tree
I’d grant God prose and poetry.
Renaissance
by Martha McCoy

Pansies stretch slim necks of green
Seeking safety from the blast,
As cold wind casts its chilly spell,
Uninvited to their spring.

Huddled blossoms, heads dirt-bound,
Collapse against each other
Like fancy, frilly, floppy hats,
Soggy now, and on the ground.

Suddenly, warm sun, then rain
Saturate the flower forms
Who once again stand straight and tall—
Grateful, playful, born again!

Delhi Diary
By Karen Primack

Aron and I spent seven wonderful weeks in 2007 living in New Delhi, India. Aron was a Science Fellow at the US Embassy, working on collaborative medical research projects. I was footloose, with plans to catch up on the 100 back copies of magazines I had brought with me and with hopes of spending some time observing in Indian kitchens.

This was our fifth time in India, but the only time we were not tourists in a hurry to see everything and move on. It was so pleasant to wake up to singing birds and other morning sounds in a residential neighborhood (the Embassy supplied a spacious one-bedroom apartment) in this city with wide tree-lined avenues, and then to go out and confront the challenging but invigorating reminders of where we really were—the hordes of people out and about, the aromas of spices, the colorful women’s dress, the vendors of food and everything else, and the omnipresent cows ambling in the streets in the midst of the buses, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, motor-rickshaws, and pedestrians.

Aron had a driver and a nine-to-five job, but I was unstructured and able to explore. I shopped for our daily necessities of milk, fruit, bread, cheese, and Indian snacks, and also for special things—dress and suit fabric, tailors, recommended books and CDs, a hairdresser, gifts. I walked a lot, and also took many taxis and auto-rickshaws. The latter are my favorite mode of transportation—three-wheeled motorcycles with seating for two passengers—cheap and able to dart in and around the traffic. I’d love to see them in DC!

We heard that Bill Gates put $1.2 billion worth of infrastructure in Hyderabad, where Microsoft has its Indian headquarters—with good reason. Despite its advanced strides in computer technology, India’s infrastructure is deficient. The roads and sidewalks are often either broken up or absent, and electricity is very iffy, even at “important” places like government offices or the US Embassy. At our apartment, the electricity failed and the noisy generator kicked on many times during the day and night.

When we first arrived, I inquired at the Embassy about possible volunteer opportunities. I got an excellent referral, and my volunteer time tutoring conversational English to teenagers in the slums was thoroughly delightful and rewarding—the highlight of my stay. Every week my five students and I talked about everything under the sun—personal backgrounds and families, religion, animals, global warming, fashion, the concept of charity, HIV/AIDS, native and Western music (they had never heard the words symphony, opera, or Beethoven), etc. I was invited into a couple of modest but clean one-room slum dwellings. Aron and I sat on a bed while we were served tea and entertained by the family, outwardly proud of their well-organized space, with a concrete—not dirt—floor and running water and showers nearby.

Some friends tell me they will never go to India because the poverty is too painful to see, and I do understand. But I was lucky to find the organization Projectaid Welfare Society, which works hard to prepare slum children for entrance to school, the key to escaping poverty. It’s a little like Head Start, but
even more crucial because there is no free universal education in India (!) and children must compete for a limited number of spaces and must come up with money for fees, uniforms, and supplies. Projectaid also provides medical services and literacy and job training (especially weaving) for women. I was so happy and relieved to be able to give my time and money to them rather than to donate to and encourage children begging in the streets!

The next-best highlight for me was the food—even more delectable than on our four previous visits (I gained ten pounds in the seven weeks we were there). We decided not to set up our apartment kitchen for such a short stay, so we ate out almost all of the time. I suppose the increased quality had something to do with the fact that we were not eating in tourist places—for the first time ever. I never found the time to learn in any restaurant kitchens, but we became more adept at tasting, appreciating, and increasing our tolerance for spiciness a bit. The vegetarian dishes were certainly a revelation, not surprising since most Hindus still seem to avoid meat. Back at the apartment we had fruit, cereal, eggs, grilled cheese, and a special creation of our own, “chaaty raita,” composed of yogurt, tomatoes, carrots, paneer (cheese) cubes, lime juice, pumpkin seeds, lots of salt, and crunchy-spicy Indian snack foods. Now back home, our first excursion to our old (previously adored) Indian restaurant was disappointing. But we will happily devote ourselves to finding a satisfying substitute.

Observing (and participating in) religion in India is always interesting. We had gotten an intense dose of Buddhism in Bhutan three months before, so we concentrated more on Hinduism and Sikhism. We were finally convinced by a couple of highly educated Indians (one Hindu and one Jewish) that Hinduism is really a monotheistic religion, with the various deities being merely aspects of the over-arching supreme being. The religion’s tolerance of the caste system and of dubious treatment of women is off-putting, but its tolerance of all religions is heartening.

We flew to Amritsar for three days to see the Sikhs’ Golden Temple, which was awesome. We visited it thrice, at different times of day, and saw an amazing procession one night as The Book was “put to bed.” There would be a ceremony to bring it out again the next morning at four o’clock; we weren’t up to it, but we understand that the daily procession at dawn is also well attended.

Our second home was at the small synagogue in Delhi, where we attended weekly services and joined in their golden jubilee celebration. The “native” community of Bene Israel Jews, who came to India 2000 years ago, is down to 10 families in Delhi, but the congregation is augmented by Jewish expatriates and diplomats. I loved the chanting of their spiritual leader, Ezekiel Malekar (a human rights attorney), and enjoyed getting to know Nissim Moses, an Indian–Israeli engineer/businessman with a lot of wit and wisdom. My favorite tidbit from him: “You can be yourself and still dwell among others.”

We cherished our time in Delhi, where we could be still and live and think. India is such a wonderful place to learn that there are many paths to the divine.

Recommended reading:
*Jesus Lived in India*, by Holger Kersten, a German theologian who explains how and why Jesus was a Buddhist—very thought-provoking.
*Holy Cow*, by Sarah MacDonald, an Aussie’s amusing search in India for inner peace.

No Problem
by Marcia Reinke

I wonder whether the Pope flew Air Afrique to Benin.

If so, he, or more probably one of his cardinals, monsignors, or altar boys, could still be looking for his scepter, miter, or even his underwear, in the moldy backrooms of the airport at Cotonou.

Maybe he selected Air Italia or Air France for his November visit. Or, let’s face it, he probably didn’t fly commercial at all.

Husband Bill and I had no such luxury. Bill, on a two-week assignment in connection with a student’s doctoral research, could have flown Air France business class, but decided to apply his allowed fare to Afrique so it would be cheaper for me to tag along. Afrique
flew once a day from Paris to Benin. Realizing the connection from American Airlines in the continually under-construction de Gaulle airport was complicated and short, we packed only carry-ons.

Arriving breathless, we found Afrique had no counter or waiting area. Just a uniformed man to grab our luggage and point to a ramp. “Non,” said we in what we hoped passed for French. “Baggage avec nous.”

“Non. Allez en aeroplane,” he said. “Baggage avec moi,” or something to that effect.

Once the French colony of Dahomey, Benin lies between Nigeria and Togo, in what might be called the armpit of Africa, on the Atlantic coast, just below where the continent pooches out in a pregnant hump. Hardly a direct flight, our plane stopped in Abidjan, Cote D’Ivoire; Accra, Ghana; Lome in Togo; and after Cotonou continued on to Lagos, Nigeria, and some place in Cameroon.

The Cotonou airport may have been spruced up for the Pope. But a few years back when we arrived, it was dark. Almost dark. A few blinking long, neon bulbs stretched across the waiting room, which was packed with people either awaiting the arrival or the departure of our plane. Bill’s student met us and took over the luggage search. Bill’s bag was found. Mine was not.

“No problem,” said the student. “We’ll come back tomorrow. It’s sure to be here.”

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, we trekked to the airport. That wasn’t easy. One does not just grab a taxi in Cotonou, where cars and electricity are both scarce. But at the airport we did find a very solicitous baggage clerk who greeted us warmly and each time initiated a computer search. “No problem. We find,” he said in what may have been his only English words. So we’d sit and watch.

Bill and his student–chauffeur, meanwhile had work to do—excursions to take north to the arid Sahel, a semi-desert region near the border with Niger; visits to make at clinics; statistics to look at concerning maternal health care. I had one set of clothes, those I’d worn from home. One white blouse, a navy jacket, a pair of SAS tie shoes, and khaki pants which had developed a long no-way-it-could-be-mended rip on the left leg.

A luncheon arranged for Bill and me with Benin’s Minister of Health panicked me into requesting a clothes-buying trip. Cotonou does not have department stores. Actually I didn’t see anything resembling an in-a-building store. It had a market. Like markets in many developing equatorial countries, this one covered acres and consisted of hundreds of independent stalls selling everything from bottles of gasoline and primitive tools to bolts of wildly colored cloth, cassava, and yams.

Escorted through the maze by the student’s secretary, and feeling very conspicuous in my white skin, I spent $12 on three dresses, each of which was a brightly patterned sack with no shape, just arm and neck holes. We had no luck finding shoes. The only shoes in my size were toeless orange, with three-inch heels. Early in the market tour, I realized there was no choice but to wash my underwear and white socks every night.

So I went to lunch with the Minister of Health in a stylish green job, with a black-and-white zigzag pattern, white socks, and SAS shoes. And in my purple and yellow outfit, we drove along the coast to see clinics and hospitals, where families provided the food, sheets, and clothing for the often very sick patients. Dressed in red with large blue flowers, I watched women pounding yams, drying seeds on the unpaved roadways, and I saw a father holding a child with malaria, who subsequently died. Once when we visited a birthing center, I heard Bill exclaim, “Well, at least they have running water here.”

On the fourth trip to the airport, I noted that there seemed to be no connection from the baggage man’s computer to anything other than an electrical outlet. With our student as interpreter, Bill asked, “Do you have an Internet connection to baggage people at other airports?”

“What is Internet?” I believe he asked. When we explained that we thought he was tracking down my bag through the various stops where it might have been unloaded, he looked puzzled, and apparently said he was “only looking here.”

Then, his face brightening, he suggested we look in Air Afrique’s baggage rooms. “I take,” he said, picking
up a batch of keys. We looked in four rooms, each with shelves running from floor to ceiling and each filled with lost bags, some of them there so long they were covered with mold. So far as we could make out there was no catalog of when each bag arrived, or from where, or for that matter any attempt to read address tags.

“Is other rooms like this in Togo, Nigeria, and Cameroon,” he apparently said. “You go look there?”

We did not “go look there.” Somehow it didn’t seem important any more. I’d seen a horrific bit of third world, felt thoroughly blessed, had dozens of stories to tell, and even had cause later to ponder a visit by the Pope.

Happy Birthday, Mom!
by Martha McCoy

“Cast your birthday trauma to the wind.
Come parasailing with us!
Thursday at 9:30 AM! (Bring a date.)
Love, Elizabeth and Bob”

Wait a minute! To the best of my knowledge, parasailing is being harnessed in a parachute, tethered to a speeding motorboat, and launched into the sky!

My first instinct is to plan how to get out of this gift gracefully. Maximum stresses for me are: depending upon a rope for safety, being farther from the shore than I can reach with my right hand, and having my feet higher than six inches above a safe surface. These requisites define parasailing.

As I plan my escape, a small voice inside my head murmurs, “At this stage of your life, why not?”

So, I reset to positive and invite my intellectually imaginative, physically conservative husband to be my date. He dutifully accepts.

Thursday morning dawns sunny, clear and beautiful—a perfect day for parasailing. The whole family gathers to cheer us on. Nine grandchildren, knowing of my husband’s reluctant acceptance, line up like hungry cats ready to pounce when their grandfather comes up with a creative rationale for why he is unable to go.

But macho instinct prevails and my husband soldiers on, a decision that is met with a sudden drooping of shoulders as the grandchildren realize that there will be no competition among them to inherit the hoped-for vacant seat.

We make our way to the dock, line up with six other passengers and board the boat (“clambered on” is a more accurate description). The laid-back captain tells us to “Relax—you’re gonna love it!”

Two boys, 10 and 12, volunteer to be first. The rest of us breathe a sigh of relief, and at this point, we are willing to sacrifice the young. Fortunately for our collective consciences, the boys sail and land safely.

My son-in-law and I are next. After being tethered and reassured we launch skyward. Up we go—the world is silent, peaceful, cool, and gentle. The view is stunning with miles and miles of white sandy beach—I feel as if I can see the entire Atlantic Ocean! We soar skyward, dangle in space, descend and dip lightly in the ocean, ascend once again, and return gently to the boat. An exhilarating experience!

Would I do this again? You bet! Only the next time I would dip a little deeper and fly a little higher.

This is No Bull!
by Mary Oleson

Mid-July 1974

We, the entire Oleson family, were returning home to a suburb of La Paz, Bolivia, after a memorable trip to the Machu Picchu area of Peru with friends from Bowie, Maryland: Bill and Winky Francis and their children, Amy and Alan. We had parted from those friends in Cusco very early that morning. They took a flight to Lima for a few days at sea level; we took the only train from Cusco to Puno, Peru, where we would be picked up by our Bolivian driver.

The ten-hour train ride took us through amazing aliplano scenery and one of the highest passes in Peru. I do not recall that the train stopped at any stations; but, a couple of hours beyond the pass, on a hill above the town of Pucará, it suddenly halted. John
was reading, as usual. I was looking out the window, wondering why the train would stop dead on the tracks like that, when I noticed a market in progress a bit down the hill. I asked the conductor if I had time to get off the train and look around the market. He indicated that I would have plenty of time. As I climbed down the hill, I recalled having seen the famous ceramic toritos from Pucará for sale in certain La Paz markets and decided to look for such a souvenir of Peru in the one I was fast approaching. At one table I spied the largest painted and partly-glazed clay bull I had ever seen and began bargaining for him. Haggling over price was considered a required activity in the folk markets in Latin America. I had long since mastered the system. When I had nearly completed the bargain, I looked up toward the train. To my horror, at that moment the train began chugging away very slowly. I stopped worrying about getting the best price, threw the money at the salesperson, grabbed my treasure, and raced up the hill.

To this day I do not know how I made it onto the moving train, panting up the stairs, reaching out with one outstretched arm to some anonymous helping hand, while clutching the bull to my breast with the other arm. When I got back to the seats where John and our three children were still engrossed in their previous activities, I was appalled that no one even looked up, as if I had just returned from a bathroom break. In fact, no one had noticed my absence; only the new purchase was proof of my adventure.

October 12, 2010

Now living in Baltimore, I wake up every day to the sight of my piece of beautiful Peruvian craftsmanship, still without a single chip. I wonder again how I, all alone in the Altiplano, would have found my way back to La Paz and when that day John would have thought to ask about my whereabouts, had I not leapt, Indiana-Jones-style, onto the train. My heart pounds again in remembrance.

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1. At 11,500 feet
2. Spanish for “high plateau”
3. La Raya Pass, elevation 14,172 feet
4. Spanish for “little bulls”
5. Should I coin a new word: mistressed?
The Osher at JHU Journal, the newsletter of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Johns Hopkins University, is published under the auspices of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences twice each academic year.

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