The Beaten Path

Thursday, May 3, 2012

Final Carnival

Text: Brazil and La Plata: the Personal Record of a Cruise by Charles Samuel Stewart

"The first impression made on an intelligent stranger on landing at Rio would, probably, arise from the numbers, evident difference in condition, the variety of employments, dress, and undress, almost to nakedness, of the negro and slave population. Such figures, such groupings, such costumes, as are exhibited by these on every side, would be difficult to picture or describe." Pg 72

The city of Rio de Janeiro teems with populations of all kinds, as everyone comes together to celebrate the famous Carnival. Since the arrival of Christianity here in Brazil, the beginning of Lent has been celebrated by the huge blowout of costumes, music, parades, and festivities. We were so lucky to spend our final destination in Rio just in time for the world famous Carnival. The morning began before the sun rose, with the distant beat of steel drums and rhythm instruments woke us, and we rushed to the main boulevards for the parades. Women in various stages of undress flaunt their bodies in rhythmic dances through the streets, leaving little regard for customary modesty. Samba troupes parade through in spectacular shows of talent. On the side roads, there are many smaller parades in which the general public is invited to dance and participate. The elaborate costumes of the professional dancers include feathers, beads, sparkles, headdresses, and skirts of epic proportions. Many of the samba schools prepare for the event year round. The party occupies the entire city for a whole week, and goes late into the night before starting up again before sunrise. We were able to wander and watch for hours, fighting through the cheering crowds to see the most celebrated dance troupes as well as experiencing some of the smaller parades and parties away from the main one.

The magic of Carnival.
There is a grandiose amount of consumption throughout Carnival, as locals and tourists alike see it as a time to entirely cut loose before the limited practices of Lent, when meat and other indulgences are not allowed. We ate roasted lamb, spicy rice, freshly caught fish, and the traditional meat dish of feijoada. Pastries called bolos are stuffed with meat, fruit, custard, and other fillings depending on personal preference, and bolos carts line the streets. We gave no regard to mealtimes or hunger, and simply tasted anything desirable throughout the celebration of carnival. The dancing and cheering is so exhausting, anyway, that the excessive amounts of food are almost necessary and serve as a welcome break from the festival.

Exploring the city of Rio during Carnival is not exactly easy, since the millions of residents are all crowded into the main streets and the corner pockets of the city are all but deserted. Exploring as much as we could in our spare time away from Carnival, we saw a colorful and diverse city, built into the hillsides to accommodate its rapidly growing population. The informal sector of both employment and housing is huge here, which creates problems for the government but gives the city its living feel, as under ever bridge or around any corner is a thriving little slum village, its own world away from the city and the Carnival itself.

Leaving Rio, we will return to America by plane and complete our tour of the world. We began in the frigid glaciers of Alaska and explored every climate, language, religion, culture, and history imaginable. I will never again learn so much as I have in the past year, and will never forget the memories made on this trip. My experiences will be my guide for the rest of my life, opening my eyes to the unimaginable realm of possibilities before me in this amazing world.

Playtime Down Under

*Presently, a quarter of a mile away you would see a blinding splash or explosion of light on the water—a flash so sudden and so astonishingly brilliant that it would make you catch your breath; then that blast of light would instantly extend itself and take the corkscrew shape and imposing length of the fabled sea-serpent...it was porpoises, porpoises aglow with phosphorescent light.* " Pg 107

Sydney Harbor: "It was shaped somewhat like an oak-leaf—a roomy sheet of lovely blue water, with narrow off-shoots of water running up into the country on both sides between long fingers of land, high wooden ridges with sides sloped like graves." Pg 112
"He said that the kangaroo had pockets, and carried its young in them when it couldn't get apples. And he said that the emu was as big as an ostrich, and looked like one, and had an amorphous appetite and would eat bricks. Also, that the dingo was not a dingo at all, but just a wild dog..." page 101

We went south from Indonesia to the old English colony of Australia, known for pristine beaches, exotic wildlife, and a recreational mentality that pervades the entire country. It is a perfect place to relax and adventure through the various ecosystems they have to offer. I am most drawn to the opportunities afforded by the ocean, which in addition to swimming include snorkeling and fish watching, fishing, diving, sailing, and surfing. The crystal blue ocean floor is covered with miles of teeming coral reefs, tiny worlds full of fish, crustaceans, plants, and more. Larger ocean mammals, such as dolphins, whales, sharks, and big fish also lurk under the water's surface, coming up to feed or play as needed. On our ride in, we were accompanied by dolphins, which love to swim in the wake of the big ships that come into the Sydney Harbor. These dolphins followed us in, diving and twisting at the bow of the boat, never missing a beat or falling behind, despite our speeds. It was a fantastic way to be introduced to the playful culture here in Australia, as the entire crew stopped arrival preparations to enjoy the presence of the smart, cunning water creatures.

From the white sand beaches of Sydney, a visitor is within arm's reach of any recreational activity imaginable. Aboriginal natives walk the shores, touting tours, surf lessons, dive equipment, and more, for extremely low prices. We rented long wooden surfboards, and floated amongst the small waves close to shore attempting to balance and ride a wave into the shore, as many of the young Australians do with grace and ease. While surfing was not my special talent, I spent many hours kicking above the fragile and beautiful coral reefs with a mask and snorkel rented for a few cents on the beach. The variety of colors and creatures right below my eyes was incredible.

The unique wildlife of the Australian continent is not confined to the ocean, of course. Just a few hours past Sydney is the "Outback," a remote landscape that covers much of interior Australia. Kangaroos, dingoes, koalas, emus, and other animals run freely here, which causes some danger to the traveler. Even seemingly sweet kangaroos will get angry and defensive, and use their powerful hopping legs to deliver a mighty blow to any
person or animal who disturbs their habitat. We were careful to keep a safe distance when observing these unique creatures in the wild.

Australia is a unique, confined ecosystem where recreation rules and people, plants, and animals coexist in a mutually beneficial balance that exists nowhere else in the world.

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Wednesday, May 2, 2012

Recuperation in Java, Indonesia

Text: Life in Java, with sketches of the Javanese by William Barrington d'Almeida, 1864.

"As the road was broader now and more even, we proceeded at a much more rapid rate, passing through jungles of lofty umbrageous forest trees, their sides and branches covered with lovely parasites and creepers, under which, in some parts, were coffee plantations; their white flowers something like those of the Jessamine at a distance, impregnating the air with delicious perfume." Page 138-139

As we near the Pacific Ocean once again, we've nearly come full circle on our own exploration of this world. The experiences have been one in a lifetime, and we've done and seen things that we never even imagined could exist. After all these months of planes, trains, and automobiles, not to mention horse, ship, or foot, we are feeling quite exhausted as we make our way through the last legs of our trip. We journeyed over to the island nation of Indonesia, stayed in the dirty, crowded city of Jakarta for a few days before escaping to the relative quiet of the Java Island. What better way to rejuvenate, we thought, then a stay on the famous coffee plantations of the island?

Java coffee is world famous for pioneering the world coffee industry and for its strong, sweet distinctive flavor. Some of the larger plantations, which have been in operation since the days of Dutch colonialization, offer tours and stays for visitors such as ourselves, who want to see where their treasured coffee comes from. The plantations are huge, and employ hundreds of native Indonesians for the backbreaking labor they
require. Harvest of the coffee beans, called berries, is done in the late summer months and then begins the months-long process of drying, husking, storing, and finally packaging. The coffee is shipped to international ports all over the world, and is Indonesia’s chief export. The plantation had several buildings of rudimentary machinery, such as a threshing and husking machine and storage silos, but much of the work is still done by hand to maintain the pristine reputation of this variety.

In addition to coffee exportation, Indonesia is also home to a wonderful rainforest filled with all kinds of exotic flora and fauna. Growth of the coffee industry, as well as logging and mining, is starting to threaten some of the areas of rainforest, so our tour of Bali’s wildlife preserve was very cautious, so as not to disturb the revegetation there. In well-equipped forest buggies, we caravanned through an old mining trail, stopping to observe orangutans swinging in the canopy, poisonous frogs darting up trees, screaming monkeys, snakes longer and thicker than a grown man’s arm, and so much more. Wild boars especially cross the path frequently, paying little attention to the human presence. The many-layered rainforest never sleeps, as something is always moving, shrieking, growing, or eating. The diverse plant life comes alive in itself, with vivid colors and scents that perfume the forest.

The tropical journey was a spectacular one, and the colors, smells, and sounds of the jungle will stay with us for years when we think of the price of habitat destruction there for the simple luxuries offered at home.

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Monday, April 30, 2012

Give The Sun No Chance

"As we draw nearer to the sacred Ganges, the crowd of pilgrims that is wending its way thither, grows larger, more cosmopolitan, and more interesting. Here are Hindus from every part of India and of every conceivable caste."—Our Journey Around the World, page 338

We trundled across the Middle East in a series of train rides and caravans, through the relentless heat of the deserts and cities that scatter the landscape. We saw elephants and camels and monkeys, all tamed in quite unnatural ways, doing the work of horses or people in the villages. Life here revolves around the force of the sun, and escaping the heat is always a consideration for the daily lives of the people. People work fewer and more obscure hours, taking a nap in the heat of the day or using their precious water supply to cool off the children or animals.
Poverty and disease run rampant in India, as the cold grasp of the caste system is still inescapable. In Calcutta, the streets are lined with the saddest sights: beggars of all ages unable to move from the disease and starvation that encompasses them. Good Samaritans try to help, and overcrowded orphanages and impromptu soup kitchens dot the edges of the “untouchable” neighborhoods. Unfortunately, most Indians believe misfortune will fall upon them if they attempt to help the lower classes, so the orphanages are run by Westerners, mostly Catholic nuns or other charitable folk who seek to spread the kindness of their god to this world.

We visited one such orphanage, run by sisters from Ireland, and were invited to spend the day overseeing and assisting with their daily operations. Dozens of children live in the small compound, which is really just an old house modified with beds, classrooms, and play spaces. Many of the children are biological brothers and sisters who were brought here by a distant relative or older sibling when their parents died, or didn’t return from a day of work on the streets. Their stories are sad, but the children are all laughs, and loved meeting new people such as ourselves. We played games in the dirt with them outside the house, and ate their meager portions of rice and water for lunch, squatting in a circle on the dirt floor of the kitchen. Living in filth or squalor is all relative, and for these kids the orphanage is a safe, healthy place far superior to anything they have ever known. The nuns are kind and work hard to provide basic skills to the children to hopefully improve their standing in the world by the time they are old enough to leave. Children older than about eight years old must work, but at least here they are able to split their time between learning in the classroom and begging or doing odd jobs in the streets. It’s a dangerous life, but they do the best they can with what they have. They certainly understand the value of a hot meal or place to sleep far better than any western child I have ever known.

In addition to the orphanage, which opened our eyes more than any other spectacular landscape or adventure on this entire journey we also observed the activity of the sacred Ganges river. Men, women, and children from all classes flock to the river for its sacred healing powers. It is brown, muddy, and certainly disease ridden, but the people feel no qualms stripping out of their saris and robes and wading right in. I would be nervous in that still, muddled water that a snake or other creature would come with malicious intents, but apparently the power of prayer works well here. We touched our hands and feet to the water, simply for the experience, but it was far too crowded for us to go any further, not that we had a desire to.

India is a magical land, filled with much sadness and disease but also rich with stories and human kindness. The hot sun beats down relentlessly as we travel through, reminding us of the importance of a safe refuge and making us thankful for everything we have.
Wednesday, April 25, 2012

Time Fears the Pyramids

Text: Our Journey Around the World, Francis and Harriet Clark, 1895

"Everything fears time, but time fears the pyramids"—ancient Arab proverb

"Urnistakably the pyramids of picture-book and fancy, of boyhood's dream and manhood's anticipation." Pg 418

The Great Pyramids are the most distinct landmark of the ancient Egyptian times. They mark a landscape that is filled with buried history, that was undiscovered for hundreds of years, and contains so much more than the eye can see. We visited the great pyramids as part of our foray into the ancient Egyptian world. We approached by train, as the tourist industry has capitalized on this rarity quite well. The pyramids first appear on the horizon in stark geometric contrast to the rolling sandiness that surrounds us. Nothing else surrounds them, as all evidence of the life is buried below the surface, except for a few modern outcroppings of commercialism and celebrations. The poverty of modern Cairo still pervades even this far out in the country, as seen by beggars on the train and trash in the roads. Up close even the pyramids themselves have evidence of time and weathering on their rough edges.

The pyramids seem so sharp as we approached them, and we were wary about the day's coming adventure, as the Arab guide had told us that we could climb to the summit. Once we saw the scarred and jagged edges, though, we realized climbing would not be as dangerous as we thought. If many more tourists start to take advantage of the road to the pyramids, it will be impossible to allow climbing on the monuments, so we must take advantage of it while we are here. With two Arab guides accustomed to the tricky climb, we edged our way back and forth across the face of the Great Pyramid, the rough sandstone flaking off in our hands and clothes as we tried to keep a sturdy grip. As we sat atop the small peak of the pyramid, my mind wandered far back to the age of burial in these larger-than-life tombs. What treasures were still beneath the surface? Who had spent so many hours toiling over each individual stone, dedicating their entire life to the rich pharaoh who would only enjoy this place after his death? The Egyptian society took such a different approach to death and the afterlife than anything we are used to, so I suppose they all had different opinions on the purpose of such grand monsters. The defaced Sphinx looks over the pyramids like a relaxed mother figure, seated comfortably for thousands of years. The superstition and spiritual presence of the Egyptians looms all around.

We were also able to explore the carefully preserved remains of those treasures that were found deep in the tombs of the various pyramids and other tombs. Kept behind protected glass, the gold treasures do not hold the same resonance they would if found clustered under the ground in a pharaoh’s tomb. But there are coins, and jewelry, and vessels of every kind. They were buried with food, drinks, clothing, and more, all for the everlasting journey into the afterlife. Our museum exploration proved very rewarding after
Exhausted by heat and history, we ended the day in a dark, loud Egyptian café in Cairo. We drank lukewarm coffee and ate spicy vegetables and flaky lamb and enjoyed the local company until the sky began to lighten again over those majestic pyramids.

The Exotic Canary Islands and Morocco

Texts: Letters from the Canary Islands, by Daniel Jay Browne, Lyceum Press, Boston, 1834

Our Journey Around the World, Frances E. Clark and Harriet Clark, 1895.

"The inhabitants [of the Canary Islands], at least one half of the year, experience the intense and almost perpendicular rays of the sun; and when the periodical rains neglect to fall...Then that same orb which cheers and enlightens more temperate regions of the earth, here comes the most deadly bane...Kind nature has devised suitable reparation by fanning the earth with refreshing breezes, and by setting apart an appropriate season for rain."

We now depart Europe and continue on to some of the more exotic locations of this Earth. From the south of Italy, we boarded a small cruise ship that took us through the temperate azure of the Mediterranean, through shoreline fishing villages, olive groves, stunning beaches, and more. We stopped at the southernmost Port of Spain and departed the continent for an African journey beginning in Morocco. Morocco is a very Arab-influenced part of Africa, and this trip does not allow for Sub-Saharan exploration, so there is still plenty to see on this continent. But Morocco is home to the great sweeps of desert sand, broiling camel rides, and picturesque oases that inspire a festive, heavenly time.

We also tripped over on a short boat to the world famous Canary Islands. Technically
owned by Spain, this tropical slice of paradise seems like a world away from any sort of modern life. Tribal culture is still very prominent, and much of the land seems untouched by any hand or foot, much like our beginning journey in Alaska and the western United States. The small islands are home to hundreds of active volcanoes, and tales from the native villages kept us on our feet as we traversed the edges of the jungles, looking out for exotic wildlife and vegetation.

"A profound silence reigns with regard to their origin, in which the world must probably forever remain in darkness." - Letters from the Canary Islands, on the native inhabitants.

The native tribes here, which have been visited by Europeans and Westerners, especially Spanish explorers, have attempted to maintain the traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, gathering, and living beautiful days at the water’s edge in their grass villages. The western influences are slight but unignorable—a Spanish priest resides in the largest village, and oversees the Catholic Church there, but some tribes still practice indigenous religious practices. We observed a dancing ritual to welcome the rainy season. The rains and sun dictates the very day-to-day life of these inhabitants, so a rainy season that remains too dry or a series of storms can change the entire course of their livelihood for a year or more. In order to please their several mythological gods of rain and weather forces, they practice a dance and celebration. While the modern influences have rendered this celebration more for show than for true results, the energy and experience were nonetheless unforgettable. They were very welcoming to our small party but stressed the importance and seriousness of the event. We were included in the dancing, but the chanting and spiritual portions were somewhat isolated from our prying Western eyes.

We hiked around the base of the tallest peak of the islands, Peak Teneriffe, which has been an active volcano not too long ago in the past. Ever rumble of a mule’s hooves or snapping twig of an iguana in the brush made me jump for fear of another catastrophic eruption, but of course this is such a rare occurrence. Walking on crusted dried black lava, which has a wavy, frozen, appearance but is sharp, vicious, and easily broken, was something unsettling as well. The whole proximity of the eruption and destruction of a volcano was all around us. The tropical excursion was enlightening, relaxing, and rejuvenating. The combination of old and new in the cultures here is a great lesson in cooperation and compromise.

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Posted by Chloe Miller at 11:12 AM  No comments:

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Labels: africa, desert, exotic, travel, volcano

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Antiquity to Modernity

Text: The American in Europe
“Hail to thee, Italy! Land of sun and beauty—land of liberty and despotism—of slavery and freedom—of vices and crime—home of the arts!”

“Life in Florence is always a luxury, when it is not actual wretchedness. Wander about the town, and here the sculpture gallery, the painter’s studio, the student’s chamber, are open for you. To all of these, in turns, a stranger soon finds his way.”

Travel through Italy is a celebration of art and culture just as our visit to Paris. From Milan to Rome, the ancient cathedrals and ruins, artist’s galleries and museums, the fertile countryside rich with history as well as vegetation celebrate the pervading antiquity. From the first sophisticated civilization, that Grand Roman Empire, Italy has been the forefront of cultural movements.

In an effort to explore the renaissance days, we stopped off in Florence for the galleries and museums of artists such as Botticelli, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Galileo, and other famous figures. The city bleeds inspiration, much like the banks of Paris, but the countryside life slows down the pace here in Florence, allowing for a more relaxed exploration. The Uffizi Gallery is consistently filled with the works of famous renaissance men. My eyes could not even fathom the sheer volume and magic of the paintings and sculptures here. Michelangelo’s marble work is perhaps the most famous, as the statue of David was in popular demand. Religious tradition is heavy in Italy, as it is in much of Europe, especially in the historic and cultural centers. The Duomo cathedral in Florence, hundreds of years old, is easily the most spectacular building in the city. Striped and colored marble rise toweringly into the sky, and the shafted ceilings give way to the largest rotunda of all. The most impressive part about viewing the Duomo or any of the works of art in this city is imagining the struggles of those building them, who had no modern technology or machinery to assist them. Each piece of art is a true labor of love.

The true feel of a city is best achieved when you can see the city as a whole. We gained special access to climb the Campanile—the bell tower just next to the Duomo in the main piazza. Climbing the hundreds of narrow stairs to the top of the tower felt like climbing back into history, and when we finally ducked our heads around the huge iron bells and out the little square windows, it was like seeing the city for the first time. Each little narrow cobblestone street, snaking crookedly through shops, neighborhoods, and groups of people reminded me of the effort of ancient construction. The lives of each simple individual seen all at once helped mold the city into a living, breathing object right there in the dizzying bell tower.
We could explore the crooked corners of Florence, or any other Tuscan town, for days upon days. Of course, our train to Rome awaited us and we departed, further into the history of ancient Rome, but back into the bustling modern world of the city. Modernity is questionable now, what with all these hundreds of century of history with so many glorious contributions. Where would we be without the map of the ancients?

Posted by Chloe Miller at 8:27 AM  
No comments:

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Labels: art, education, history, Italy, travel