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Book Review: cool creatures, hot planet: exploring the seven continents by Marty Essen - Around the World

By: Mary Keener



I solved my midlife crisis. My brain consulted with my fingers, toes, and knees, and we collectively refused to be conformists participating in the aging process. My birth certificate claimed I was thirty-nine years old, but we weren't about to believe a piece of paper with an illegible signature from the year the Rolling Stones became a band. My brain and the rest of my twenty-seven-year-old body were going traveling.

The travelling is with wife, Deb, on a journey to find life - wild, plant, fauna, flora. The search encompasses seven separate trips, with rest stops in their own wildlife sanctuary of Montana.

We begin in Belize at the environmentally friendly, Black Rock Lodge, where Mr. Essen says, "I felt as if I were in a giant greenhouse, without the pots." Feel the heat?

Another heat soon follows when we learn the author is on a mission to find a fer-de-lance snake - the deadliest in the Western Hemisphere! Grip the arms of your reading chair, hold your fear back and prepare for a ride, a thrill and an adventure.

This remarkable experience comes in several forms - anticipation, knowledge of cultures and nature, the author's ability to take the reader with him, his ever present sense of timeliness and humor. Marty Essen cleverly prolongs the end of several episodes with personal thoughts, promise of later fulfillment. Now and then, he steps aside (quite Shakespearean) from the story to make a point, express an idea, vent an emotion, share his learning. Very effective!

The author isn't bashful about expressing his political views - related to travel and the environment. He obviously feels strongly about our planet, especially those creatures unable to speak for themselves. He is an American travelling abroad, more comfortable with his beloved animals and insects than with humans. In fact, I was quite amazed with his patience, love of and respect for the non human inhabitants of the world. They can surely use all the help they can get.

"We wanted to experience the rainforest, not just a resort located in the rainforest." He and his wife did just that in each location. They touched, felt, heard the lands, up close, away from well travelled paths. And the reader only benefits.

"One of the most exciting aspects of exploring a remote rainforest region is that you never know when you'll discover a new species." Haven't you heard statements like *The world has already been explored. It*

(the world) *is smaller. Hard to find new territory, a place not infested with tourists.* Here is a couple, definitely adventurous, out to find creatures not wanting to be found, going the beyond, stretching themselves more than their own perceived capabilities can handle (their trek in Borneo calls for endurance, trust and confidence at a survivor level difficulty).

Parts of the book are encyclopedic - fascinating pieces of information about our co-inhabitants achieved through good storytelling. Name the three most unfairly persecuted animals on earth. What about this? "The rainforest is full of harmless creatures that mimic dangerous creatures." Amazing. When you read what some of them do, you'll be impressed!

We're never far from the author's mind. He communicates with us through anticipation, stopping to make sure we're with him. He pokes fun at himself, treats the reader as a companion on this fabulous journey. We laugh, chuckle, become sad, upset and frustrated - right along with him.

Who goes to Europe in search of wildlife? Marty and Deb did. They're quite the non touristy, independent type of folks. One village they went to in Spain sees an average of 13 visitors per year! Even Mr. Essen's descriptions of a castle are original and imaginative. He spices everything, observes keenly and attentively, expresses his viewpoints with respect and courtesy, as he would of his wildlife creatures.

Marty Essen is one enthusiastic explorer - oozing an infectious thrill at a find, an adventure, a risk. In the middle of his and his wife's caribou watch of the great migration, he writes.

A trio of huge bulls, whom I dubbed the Three Kings, stood atop the hill keeping a close eye on their subjects and Deb and me as well. Though I'm speculating, the Three Kings appeared to be taking responsibility for the security of the current migration wave. Once their subjects were safely beyond us, they descended to the valley floor and trotted on by.

Excuse me while I catch my breath....

Taste that excitement!

This 440-page book is layed out thoughtfully, with originality (mini drawings of creatures native to each area are used as breaks rather than chapters). The colored photos add to our visualization of what the author saw, experienced and discussed. I wanted more - they were that good! Maps at the front of the book are decent general indicators of where this journey took place. I would have preferred more detail, a minor complaint. In no way did it stop me from continuing the journey.

I am not a lover of camping (which the authors are). I am not fond of insects. Snakes terrify me. I can barely hike a flatland more than several miles, much less what these people did, but I'm not afraid of heights, as the author is. See how he copes when he's in a high and precarious situation. The event with the hippotamus pushing the canoe up with Essen and his wife in it was frightening and tense. I knew they lived through it, but still... a testament to a well written book. In spite of being on a different planet from the author, I enjoyed the book for the reasons stated, for the travel aspect, for the chance to experience something really different *without* being in it yet part of, and for the knowledge I gained, savored and am forever changed by.

[cool creatures, hot planet](#)

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