

INTO THE WORLD

A Personal

View of an

International

Odyssey.

By Richard Amdur

The college year abroad has become a modern rite of passage for many students. Well-intentioned but lacking in even the rudiments of worldliness, these students bravely submit to a cavalcade of new sights and experiences in which museums, ruins, cafés,

Photo by Emille Wamsteker



and “eccentric” locals and their “odd” customs all figure prominently. A *coup d'état* or some such political eruption adds a hearty dash of intrigue and peril. Romantic interludes deepen their cultural immersion and precipitate emotional crises. They glide through the unfamiliar shoals of their adopted homes and, in the end, emerge undaunted, urbane, and primed for success, shouldering rucksacks brimming with memories.

My own semester with Syracuse University's Division of International Programs Abroad in 1978 did not deviate far from this well-thumbed script. In four months at large in London, followed by three months spent marching through Europe, I matured as never before. The experience resisted easy classification. Viewing it as one that marked my crossing from adolescence to adulthood was not entirely satisfying. Rather, it heralded something grander, something more in keeping with the seismic changes I felt within. I seemed to have undergone my own personal Big Bang.

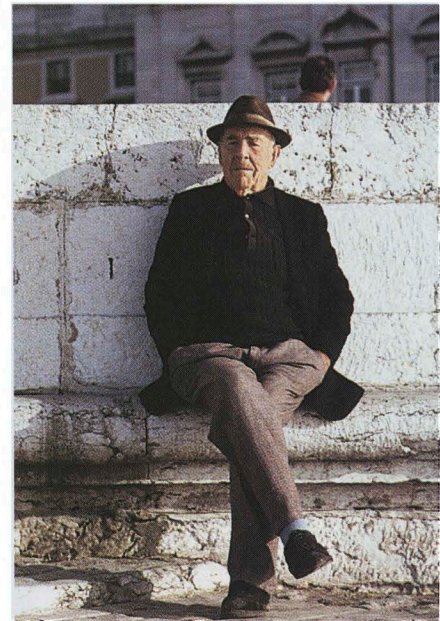
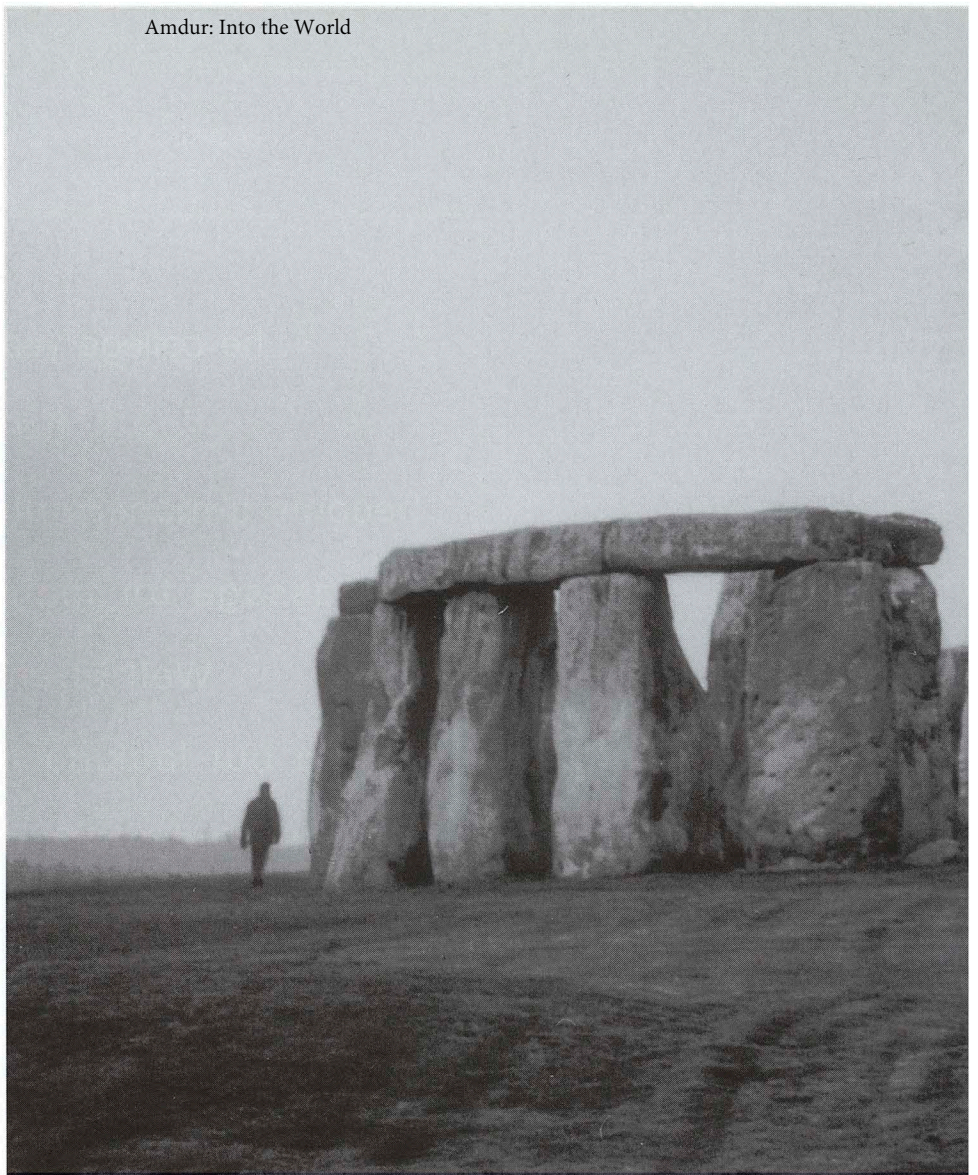
Sure enough, the reverberations set off by that first taste of life abroad continue to resonate so deeply and incessantly that I am entranced by the mere sight of a map or mention of anything vaguely international. Thus I have been compelled to return to the well as often as possible, embarking on a handful of short trips and, more significantly, two lengthy sojourns. My three big journeys—the semester in London and Europe, a yearlong stay on a kibbutz in Israel, and, most recently, an extensive backpacking trip through Asia—have helped me define who I am, what I do, and how I think and feel.

The benefits of venturing to distant shores are legion, as wayfarers from Polo to Chatwin have testified. The senses sharpen. One constantly learns essential information, from basic facts to the meaning of humility. And the exhilaration of discovery compensates for the dawning horror of one's ignorance of other peo-

ples, traditions, and civilizations.

The most abiding results, however, are found while confronting, as any such expedition forces one to do, the most fundamental matters of identity: Who am I? What are my roots? What are my loyalties? Am I a member of a tribe, a nation, a race? Do such labels carry any meaning? How am I unique? What beliefs, values, and character traits make me American and not Chilean, Turkish, or Nepalese? How am I like my fellow humans and what are my responsibilities to them? To my fellow Americans? To my neighbor across the garden fence?

When I began considering these questions in London, I was a kid who had never thought much for himself. Until then, my agenda tended to be set by my teachers, the sport of the season, or peer pressure to smoke, drink,

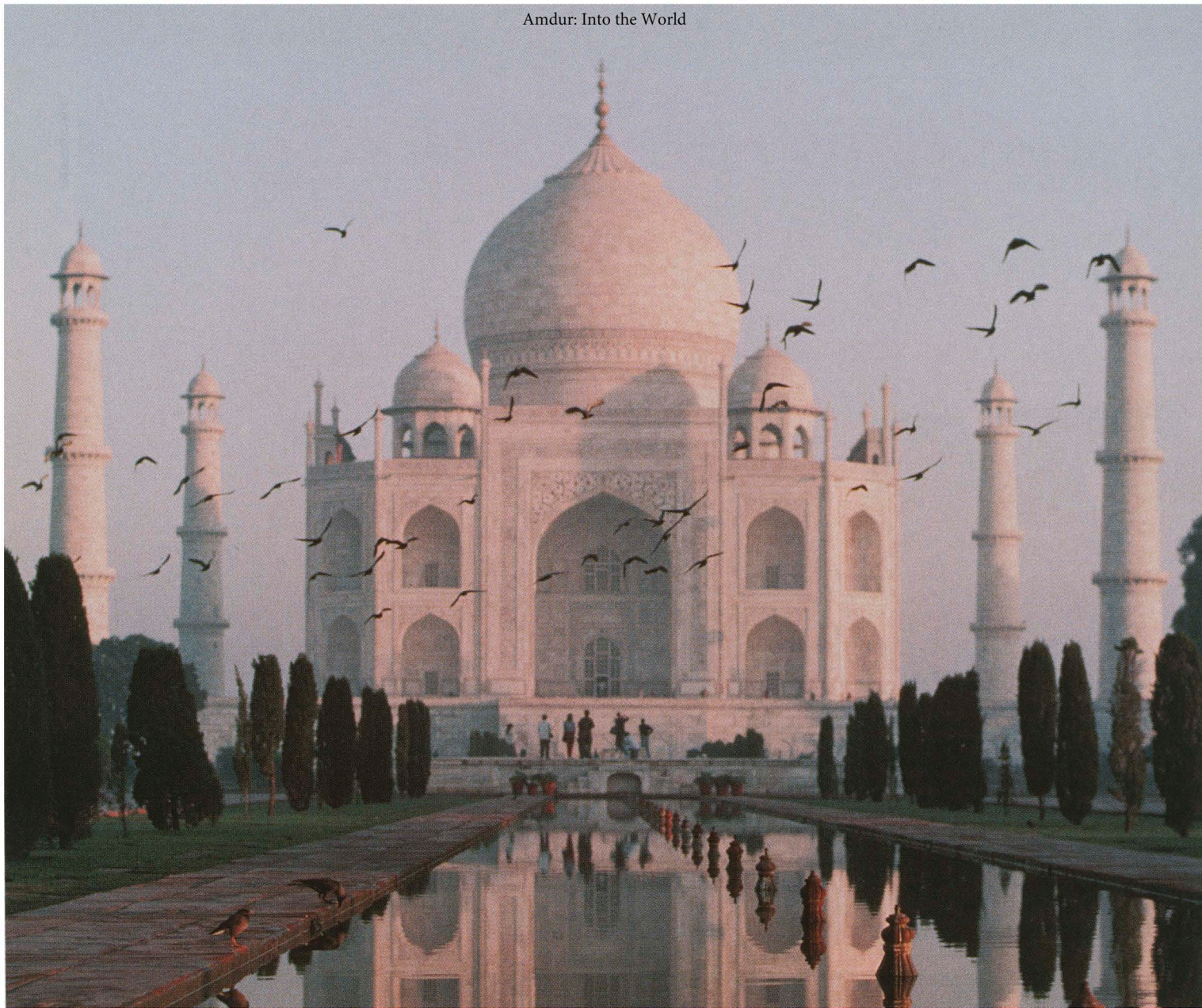


EMILE WAINSTEKER



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The author's first foreign trip came through Syracuse University's Division of International Programs Abroad and brought him face to face with many of Europe's peoples, cultures, and landmarks, including Stonehenge in Great Britain (above).



An Indian engineer acquainted the author with the miraculous Taj Mahal, the wondrousness of Gandhi, and the preponderance of Indian millionaires.

and chase girls. The London program, with its generous free time, stripped me of these reassuring mainstays, forcing me to differentiate between true interests and needless distraction.

I haunted the National Gallery, making my first real acquaintance with that kind of creative energy. Questions somersaulted off my tongue as I sought to understand why punk rockers spat at their fans and what issues prompted similar behavior by bellowing ministers of parliament. Upon observing that both Stonehenge and World War II remained vital parts of the contemporary British landscape, I began to fathom time's

real relativity, that it was both infinitely vast and yet collapsible into a single instant.

On the other hand, the semester's endeavors had taken place firmly within the context of my familiar Judeo-Christian value system, allowing me to experience just a fraction of the world's cultural and spiritual diversity. My mind was so clogged with the art of the Impressionists and the sights of ancient Greece and Rome that I was practicing my own brand of cultural imperialism. Somehow I managed to pass through the Muslim provinces of what was then Yugoslavia without learning a whit about Islam.

Unfortunately for me, I grasped this crucial point only when I offended a young engineer from India with whom I shared a train compartment. In a woefully misguided application of my journalism schooling, I made conversation by conducting a relentless interrogation, the thrust of which was that my companion had reason to be ashamed of his country's poverty. In fact, I knew appallingly little about India at that time. In my ignorance I pushed onward, fueled by chutzpah, grilling my nonplussed seatmate until he kindly acquainted me with the wondrousness of Gandhi and the miraculous Taj Mahal, the preponder-

ance of Indian millionaires, and the existence of a large and thriving middle class. Soundly humbled, I resolved to enlarge my horizons. Clearly I had much to learn, and not just about India.

At this juncture, a stint in the Peace Corps might have made sense. But when, in June of 1981, I quit my magazine job to try life on the kibbutz, I found myself exploring not the universal but the particular. My choice was motivated by the chance to work outdoors and not out of any need to rediscover a Jewish identity diluted by assimilation. Or so I told myself.

Fourteen months later (13 more than I had initially planned), having feasted on Jewish history, Israeli politics, communal living, and the real pleasures of intense physical labor, I returned home thinking seriously about emigration. Gone was the one-worldism sparked by my semester abroad; in its place was my new status as a tribal standard-bearer.

I had not thought such a metamorphosis was possible, but in the heat of Israel's 1982 intervention in Lebanon, I chanted along when a television news broadcast showed infantrymen singing a song whose lyrics translated roughly as, "Here is what's good and what's pleasing: a tribe, brothers, a nation together." It was a heady yet dissonant moment. On the one hand were feelings of belonging, of being invested with a cause. On the other was the inherent danger of my willingness to take sides. That tension persists to this day.

My most recent journey, a year of traveling with my wife through India, Nepal, Thailand, and China, offered a crash course in the many problems of poverty, the uneasy legacy of colonialism, and the infinite varieties of religious practice.

Many people say the world is not as hospitable as it once was, that those living in even the most far-flung places have learned to distrust strangers, and

that a certain kind of generosity and innocence has vanished. But my wife and I were greeted with gifts and open doors wherever we went, particularly from those who owned next to nothing or whose lives were in some other way under siege. In India, we wove our way around spasms of horrible communal violence, but through it all we were befriended and even fed by those who insisted upon sharing their home-cooked dinners.

Yet often enough, something was asked of us in return, as Americans—given the influence of the United States in so many areas, shouldn't citizens of other countries be permitted to cast votes in American elections? As absurd as this may seem, it reflects the reality that what we Americans do, both abroad as would-be ambassadors and at home, matters.

Through my travels as an uncredentialed emissary, I brought back to this country a new appreciation for the standard of living, opportunities, and freedoms I have always enjoyed in the United States, but perhaps taken for granted. In particular, my love for New York, the great port city in which I live, grows with every walk in Central Park and even with every ride in the subway. At the same time, I submit the same society to more withering scrutiny.

As a result, I have become more demanding of myself and of friends and strangers alike: to be polite, to be patient, to be more mindful, and to place things in global perspective. And I have come to agree with Samuel Johnson, the 18th-century British writer and lexicographer,

among whose many wise observations was that the use of traveling is "to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are." ■

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