

## Nothing Routine: A Quest for Discovery in Remote and Strange Places

Jon Helminiak  
Seaboard Press, 2005  
244 pages, paperback

By RK Olson

This is a book in the Sigurd Olson tradition of travel and discovery of both the world about us and of “the wilderness within.” But with a difference. Jon Helminiak is a member of the generation that has had the freedom and ability to roam the world pretty much at will and to come home with good stories and a deepened understanding not only of the world but of itself.

There was a time when the term “well traveled man” meant someone who had visited and even lived in Paris, Rome, London, New York, San Francisco, maybe Moscow and Petersburg (Leningrad), cities of the world with all their cultural legacies and comforts, and who came home with colorful stickers on his baggage to show it. Not anymore.

The well-traveled man or woman today means one who has traveled literally to what an earlier era called “the ends of the earth.” That meant the world of Teddy Roosevelt and the Amazonian “River of Doubt,” of Stanley hiking across Africa to find Livingstone, of dining in Baghdad with Gertrude Bell, of little Shangri Las tucked away in the Himalayas, and of Robert Service, the Yukon and “The Call of the Wild.”

Those places are still there today, a little better known at the ragged edges of the Third World, but still remote, and still promising some adventure, some excitement, and some wild wilderness. This is the world that Jon Helminiak has decided to share with the rest of us. The title *Nothing Routine* betrays his need for escape from the routine of the office and conventional life in “A Quest for Discovery in Remote and Strange Places.” Good enough. Then, gradually, he writes, it came to him that what he had actually written was “a book about soulful exploration, with travel and adventure being the conduit.”

Besides, he writes, “I am easily bored, dislike authority, avoid crowds, and can’t stay in one place too long,” the confession of an incurable vagabond.

I would like to retell some of Jon’s stories, especially from places familiar to me like Vietnam. But I will refrain and leave it there for the reader to enjoy first hand. Suffice to say, Jon brings us a traveller’s good fireside yarns about rafting down “The River of No Return” in Idaho, of a couple of close shaves with grizzlies and rapids while canoeing down Alaska’s Copper River, of exploring by kayak the “Forbidden Sea Islands” of Myanmar (the Merguín Archipelago of Burma), of trekking in the beautiful Torres Del Paine National Park in Patagonia (Chile).

My favorite is his account of searching for the country of the headhunters in the northern Philippines. He started in Manila with a rented car, a bad map, and worse advice to drive through hours of a traffic jam of honking cars, sweltering humanity, and

wandering livestock toward the northern highlands beyond the now notorious Mt. Pinatubo volcano to remote Sabagam, the highest village in the Philippines, for a blessedly cool overnight and an unexpected and—as it turned out—unforgettable experience. He went on the next day to the villages of the headhunters who still dress in native costume, tattooed from head to toe, and still relish their now outlawed headhunting tradition. But, what surprised Jon about the whole venture, was a moment, unexpected and profound in Sabagam, an epiphany with tears as he gazed at the age-old, serene, beautiful, and picturesquely permanent panorama of hillside terraces emerging from the jungle.

I loved it. The description of daily life along the way was simple, unadorned, and true to life. I could see it, smell it, and hear it all myself. It has the feel of the authentic as compared to run-of-the-mill travel writing devoted to sea, sand, and sun laced with lavish and luxurious lodging and “exotic cuisine,” oh my.

But there is more, folded in here and there, having to do with wilderness, and that is where the Sigurd Olson parallel becomes more apparent. “Spiritual awareness, revelation, emotional movement usually occur in moments of solitude when one’s senses are sharp and concentration magnified.” Sound familiar?

But enough. You will have to read the book. The writing is great, professional and disciplined with every chapter a good story. You will enjoy it.

Every reviewer is obliged to criticize something to make the review something besides a sales pitch. My criticism is the lack of maps. A travel book without maps? I spent the better part of an hour with a good atlas and a magnifying glass trying to locate place names on the southern coast of Myanmar. Fun, but a map would have helped (and enhanced the book). And where is the Copper River in Alaska and the Burntwood in Canada? Recommend maps should be added to the second edition.

Finally, when Jon is not roaming the outbacks of the world, he is president of Solstice Resources Development of Mequon, Wis., devoted to assisting nonprofits with financial development; an instrument-rated frequent flyer; closely associated with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and a member of the Board of Directors of the Listening Point Foundation, Inc. ●

—Former LPF Board member Bob Olson  
lives and writes in Seeley, Wisconsin.

