

## Opinion by Bonnie Henry : Small world

### Tucson couple values globe-trekking experiences over material possessions

#### Opinion by Bonnie Henry

It was the trip of a lifetime. Two trips, actually. In 2002, Bob Riel and Lisa Higgins, wed the year before, embarked on a three-month-long trip that took them from Greece to Turkey, then on to Kenya, Thailand, Beijing and Tokyo.

In 2005 they did it again, this time traveling to Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Singapore, Egypt and Europe.

But this was no four-star-hotel experience. The couple traveled at times by rickshaw and rickety bus, flatbed truck and camel.

More than mere sightseeing, the trip, says Riel, was a life sabbatical — one that more of us should undertake to renew and refresh our lives.

"You can't do this and not be a different person," says Riel, who's written a book about the experience. "We didn't use tour groups or travel agents. We booked our own flights. You can travel so much cheaper than people realize."

Today, the couple is back home in Tucson, with son Brady, 10 months. Higgins, 38, works as associate director of the Valley Fever Center for Excellence at the University of Arizona, while Riel, 47, does cross-cultural consulting and works on his blog, Travels in the Riel World ([www.rielworld.com](http://www.rielworld.com)).

He's also researched and written more than 70 training manuals for people working in foreign countries.

"I grew up dreaming about traveling the world," says Riel, who joined Up With People in 1983. For 10 years, he worked with the organization that has troupes of young people performing around the world.

"We toured a lot of western Europe," says Riel. Years later, he and Higgins, who had briefly worked at Up With People, met at a People mixer in Boston.

Riel was working for a cross-cultural consulting firm in Boston. Higgins was in public health research there.

Then came the itch to travel.

"I had a good job. They didn't have a sabbatical thing. How could I do both, work and travel?" says Higgins, who managed to get a three-month leave-of-absence. "I had to do a lot of maneuvering, get a lot of work done before I left."

First stop was Greece, cradle of Western civilization. Was it deliberate that they picked Greece as their launching pad into a tour of non-Western countries?

Perhaps, says Riel. "We also just wanted to go to Greece." But he admits it was less sabbatical, more "doing the touristy thing."

Everything changed, he says, when they got to Turkey. "Part of that was psychological, leaving the West. But we also found people much more open. We made instant friends. We made friends with one carpet dealer who closed his shop to take us to the Turkish bath."

Ah, yes. The Turkish bath, where the couple was scrubbed with a rough glove "just a level or two softer than a Brillo pad."

But Turkey is also where they heard their first call to prayer. "It's so beautiful," says Higgins.

From Turkey they went to Kenya, where they wound up discussing soccer with Masai tribal members. "The younger ones could speak English. They had seen it on TV," says Riel.

#### Travel Tales

"Two Laps Around the World," by Bob Riel. Paperback, 268 pages. Available for \$20.95 at Riel's Web site, or at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com).

#### Book signing

Bob Riel will sign his book at 7 p.m. Aug. 27 at Javalinas Coffee and Friends, 9136 E. Valencia Road.

#### DID YOU KNOW

Up With People had its worldwide headquarters in Tucson from 1968 to 1993, when it moved to Denver. Hundreds of alumni live in Tucson.

Source: Star files.

Then it was on to Bali, Thailand, Beijing and Tokyo. "My greatest memory of all of Southeast Asia is how spiritual and how gentle the people are," says Higgins.

After their trip, they returned to Boston. In 2005, they decided to move to Tucson, where Higgins had family in town and a new job waiting.

Then wanderlust hit again. Once more, Higgins negotiated to start her job after the trip. "We packed up our stuff, drove across country, bought a house and got on a plane," says Riel.

First stop, Vietnam, where they took a cooking class in the town of Hoi An. They found Singapore extremely modern, Cambodia extremely poor. But the "most mind-boggling place in the world," says Riel, was India.

They watched the sunrise coming up over the Ganges River, as people cremated their dead on its shores.

In Egypt they viewed another sunrise, this time from atop Mount Sinai — where they saw "the new dawn over the curvature of the Earth," says Riel.

But it was also in Egypt where terrorist bombs sent many tourists fleeing. Not these two. "We didn't feel unsafe among the Egyptians, who had been gracious and welcoming to us," writes Riel in his book, "Two Laps Around the World."

"When we went to the Middle East, we worried if people would be shouting, 'Down with America,' but they were the friendliest people in the world," he says.

He estimates the cost of their two trips at about \$15,000 each, both hard-earned. "We had 12-year-old cars, old furniture, saved for years," says Riel.

Travel plans have been curtailed, of course, with the birth of Brady. Then again, maybe not.

"We are going to travel with him, for sure," says Higgins. "He already has his passport."

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• *Bonnie Henry's column also appears Sundays in ¡Vamos! Reach her at 434-4074 or at [bhenry@azstarnet.com](mailto:bhenry@azstarnet.com), or write to 3295 W. Ina Road, Suite 125, Tucson, AZ 85741. Bonnie's books • Bonnie Henry's two history books are being sold as a set for \$50. Contact Renee Weatherless at 807-7760 or [rweath@azstarnet.com](mailto:rweath@azstarnet.com) to place an order.*

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