

A VANISHING VISION

Travels with the nomadic Nevada Wier.

BY CHARLOTTE JUSINSKI

The images are almost too beautiful to be real: silhouetted bicyclists crossing a bridge in Myanmar at sunset, a Thai woman carrying a yoke through an impossibly green forest, Buddhists in Ladakh prostrating in the snow toward a Lamayuru monastery. Viewing images like these on the glossy pages of National Geographic or on the walls of an art gallery, it's easy to forget that the forms in the image are real people, caught in the act of living their lives.

It is even easier, however, to forget that a real person took those pictures. Someone had to be there to see the moment, to capture it and to share it with us. It takes a certain kind of person to do such things, to leave America

worked out for Wier. While getting paid to guide tours in Nepal, Mongolia and other places, Wier brought her camera along. As time went on, people began to pay her for what she did with her camera.

During her travels, Wier found that it was the indigenous people, cultures and traditions that most fascinated her about the world. Her comfort among people of different colors and languages led to more interesting travels, as she was allowed into intimate ceremonies and invited into those worlds. In Vietnam in 1990, for example, she was a tourist during the travel embargo.

"It was the first country, and probably the only country I went to, that didn't have a guidebook," she says. Once a guidebook came out, she realized, "Sure there were some things in the guidebook that I didn't know—but mostly, I knew things that weren't in the guidebook. That taught me a big lesson, which was talk, talk, talk, talk, talk."

Packing up and leaving American life in favor of a few months in the Vietnamese rice bogs seems intriguing, but most would probably hesitate to do it.

What about intestinal parasites, militaristic junta governments, corrupt police officers and deadly famines? What about fear?

"Whenever I go give talks in New York, people always ask me if I'm scared. I'm like, 'You people from New York are asking me if I'm scared?' No, I'm afraid all the time—it's just not letting it overwhelm you that is key."

What about that time in Ethiopia when, on assignment for National Geographic, she was boating down the Blue Nile, and it was rumored that bandits ran the banks? Wier's group asked a village headman whether he'd seen any other foreigners. According to Wier, the man said, "Actually, a number of years ago I saw some people who looked like you, and I was just about to shoot them. But one of the men waved, so I didn't shoot them."

"So we were going down the river waving and waving," Wier says, laughing. "But everyone was running up to us saying, 'This is history.' They were so astonished and happy and terrified—but no one was...well, there were a couple people that waved some guns at us, but...I dunno. People have gotta shoot before I get worried."

Wier insists her penchant for gritty, sweaty countries isn't out of disregard for the United States and Europe, but out of a feeling of social responsibility for indigenous peoples.

"These cultures are vanishing at an alarming rate," Wier says. "I could get on a plane tomorrow, zoom over to China, find a guide, drive for a few days, and I could be in a village where they say, 'I haven't seen anyone who looks like you since 1950.' That's not gonna be happening in 20 years. So I tend to want to go to more of those places—there's that feeling of change."

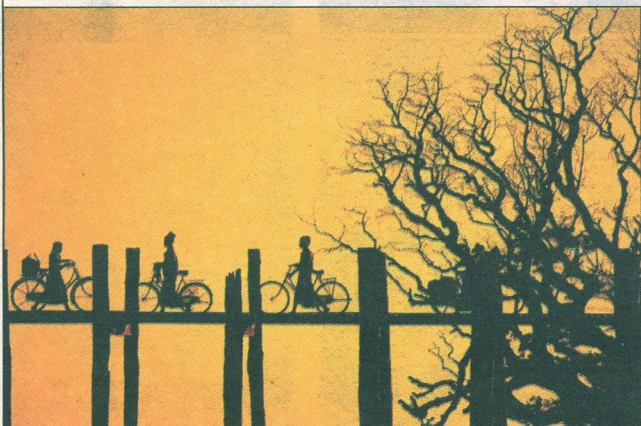
behind for a rafting trip through Ethiopia, to drive for days into the mountains of China or to witness oracles dancing on the rooftops of India. Someone had to have the vision and the courage to capture those images—someone had to be there to press the shutter button.

Enter Nevada Wier. As a college student in 1974, the East Coast city-dweller found herself working at the Outward Bound program in Santa Fe. Wier serendipitously became head of Outward Bound's Nepal program and spent half the year guiding tour groups in Katmandu, and half steering boats down the Colorado River. Out of her international adventures came a love for photography, a love for traveling and—most importantly—a love for the indigenous cultures of mostly forgotten corners of the globe.

Taking pictures of beautiful, exotic people, then conveniently selling those images to major American magazines, seems like a joyfully nomadic way to make a living.

"Since I lived this very peripatetic life on the road," Wier says of her early years, "it seemed like a natural move to start—as many people do, very naively—to think, 'Oh, I'm just gonna write about my travels and, miraculously, people will pay for it.'"

While this would be a pipe dream for most wannabe travel writers, it



The Amarapura U Bein Bridge at sunset in Myanmar proves that Santa Fe isn't the only place to take in the rays.

A NOMADIC VISION

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