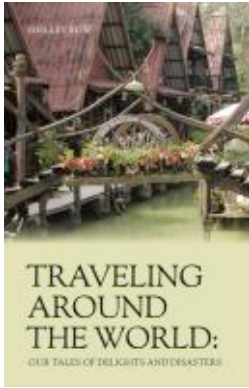


SHELLEY ROW

# TRAVELING AROUND THE WORLD:

OUR TALES OF DELIGHTS AND DISASTERS



*Shelley and her husband, Mike, embarked on a two-month trip around the world after ten months living in France. Their meticulously planned travels didn't go as planned! They experienced the riots in Cairo, the earthquake in Christchurch, and were at a hotel in Honolulu when the tsunami roared past. Shelley's stories bring to life the delight of meditating with monks in Thailand, shearing sheep in New Zealand, and the drama of traveling through disasters.*

# Traveling Around the World

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Our Tales of Delights and Disasters

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*Saturday, February 12, 2011*

## Aladdin's Garden



Forget the Garden of Eden. Thailand is like Aladdin's Garden, whose cup runneth over with flowers and food – particularly fruits of the most extraordinary kinds.

To get outside of Bangkok, we took an excursion to the floating markets. The farther we drove, the more greenery we saw. Skyscrapers turned into low buildings; small parks became large fields. We nearly jumped from the moving van when we saw our first large rice paddy, complete with a worker in the field wearing a conical bamboo hat. Our astute guide and driver found a rice field where we could stop for photos. Amused, driver happily accommodated the crazy

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American tourists. It's like tourists taking pictures of a corn field in Texas. No matter – we were thrilled.

And Mike and I remained thrilled as we boarded a long boat for the trip through narrow canals to the floating market. Bangkok is known as the “Venice of the East.”

The canals wound through coconut groves, bamboo huts, and green mangoes hanging heavy on the trees. The floating market is a series of piers where shoppers walk by perusing the vendors who are floating in long, narrow boats like canoes. The boats are lined up side-by-side, several deep, and goods and money are exchanged via a small net at the end of a long pole. *Food, food and more food.* Old women had boats overloaded with mangoes, pineapple, tangerines and papaya – the most familiar items – that they would slice on the spot. Then there were guava, rambutan, mangosteen and rose apple. Other women cooked inside their tiny boats and dished up foods to waiting hands. Tiny “monkey” bananas (half the size of the bananas we typically see) were fried and served hot. What looked like tiny custard pies, slightly bigger than a silver dollar, were actually fabulous coconut pancakes. And my favorite, coconut ice cream, was served inside a freshly cracked coconut and on a bed of the coconut meat scraped from the sides. All was prepared while we watched. *Yummy!* An old man made soup on his boat, heating it on the spot with a small burner.

On our way back, our driver took us the scenic route through fields and orchards. We saw mango and papaya trees, coconut groves and guava trees. There was even a grove of dragon fruit that looked like yucca plants gone astray. Fruits of all sorts are sold in carts all over Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Fruit drinks, made fresh, were on every corner.

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Coconuts seemed to be the workhorse. We stopped at a coconut facility where they showed us how coconuts are used. The long, thin coconut blooms (they look like overgrown ears of corn) are whacked at the bottom so the juice drains. The bloom is left on the tree to develop into the coconut. Meanwhile the juice is cooked for ninety minutes in a large vat until it caramelizes into coconut sugar. It tasted like... caramelized sugar. It's used in Thai cooking as we experienced later. The coconuts are harvested, cracked and drained, and the meat is scraped using a small bench with sharp teeth on the end.

While fruits are a star in Thailand, the flowers are not far behind. Shrubs of hibiscus and bougainvillea grow in the highway median. Tree-sized dracena line country roads, as do shrubs of croton in many varieties. Lotus flowers float in decorative bowls placed around temples, hotels and more.

We literally walked past cart after cart of prepared foods, dried fish, and fruits on every street and alley. And much of it goes into the traditional Thai dishes which we love. It was only natural that, with no plans for the weekend, we took a Thai cooking class at Silom Thai Cooking School with Sanusi Mareh. The class included only me, Mike, and a young, newly married couple from Sweden. We met Sanusi on the street and he took us to the market to do our shopping. It was great fun to finally learn about the unknown vegetables and the essential Thai spices (for example, they have three types of basil and four types of ginger). After our shopping spree – vegetables and herbs for four cost about \$3.50 – Sanusi led us to the cooking school down a long alley.

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A quick side note. One of the delightful things I've come to love about Thailand is the custom of removing your shoes before going inside. It's primarily a cleanliness thing. In the temples, people kneel and bow to the Buddha so a clean floor is essential. In a traditional Thai home, meals are eaten while sitting on mats on the floor. Keeping the floor clean is a priority – so shoes are removed and left at the entrance. But I love the sensual feel of it. There's something about walking around in bare feet on a smooth, cool surface that feels great. At the cooking school, our shoes were left outside and we padded around prepping food, cooking and eating in bare feet. How great is that?

In the span of three hours, we prepared five Thai dishes – tom yum soup, pad thai, chicken salad with sticky rice, green curry paste for chicken curry, and a dessert of rubies in coconut milk (the “rubies” were actually turnips – that's right, turnips – soaked in flavored syrups). We prepped the veggies, sliced and diced the herbs, and even pounded out green curry paste from scratch (we'll use a food processor at home, even though they insist it isn't as good). We stood outside on a narrow terrace with a row of woks in front and sautéed, boiled or stir-fried each dish. The instruction was great and everything tasted fabulous. Mike's favorite was the tom yum soup and I can't decide between the pad thai and chicken curry. The chicken salad with sticky rice was a delightful and yummy surprise. We have the cookbook and are ready to try it all again from our indoor kitchen in Annapolis. And – maybe, just maybe – we'll cook barefooted.



*Thursday, February 24, 2011*

## What a Difference a Day Makes



We're two for two. First Cairo and now Christchurch. We feel like "disasters r us." We landed in Christchurch, New Zealand after a long flight from Singapore to discover a charming, small city with a British ancestry. Christchurch looked jubilant with mounds of colorful flowers blooming their hearts out – roses, hydrangeas, geraniums, and an array of bedding plants. The city had the feel of a distinguished college campus – similar to Duke University –

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as people walked and biked past brownstone, Tudor-style buildings of high-pitched roofs, Gothic windows, and intricate spires. In the center of the city, the historic cathedral dominated Cathedral Square. We arrived during the annual flower show. The front of the cathedral was decorated with an archway of flowers, and there was a carpet of flowers down the middle of the nave inside. As we approached Cathedral Square, the carillons in the tall spire chimed their tune filling the air with ringing. The city loves its British roots. (According to our local tour guide, the British settlers arrived over 200 years ago in a “wee” boat.) The Avon River meandered slowly through the center city, its banks draped with green grass and graceful willow trees. The Bard pub held down one corner and The Oxford on the Avon restaurant occupied another. We spent a stunning, blue-sky day walking all over the city – through the historic, Tudor-style Arts Center directly across the street from our hotel, visiting the Canterbury Museum, and strolling along the river for coffee at the historic Antigua Boat Shed.

Our highlight was punting on the Avon. The Avon River is shallow and clear. Punting is accomplished by boarding canoe-like boats that are very shallow. A punter uses a long pole to push the boat along the river. We floated – or punted – under arched bridges with decorative scroll-work railings, under willow branches, and past old brown-stone buildings from the 1800s. Our punter kept up a running commentary which included discussion of the 7.1 earthquake that hit Christchurch last September. It caused substantial damage to many buildings in the city, but, he told us, another “big one” was predicted sometime soon. *Prophetic words.*

The next morning, Mike and I left for the small coastal village of Akaroa to swim with the dolphins. As we sat in a

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tiny café having lunch before the boat ride, we felt quivering and heard low rumbling. It's amazing how quickly thoughts flit through your head. Later Mike and I realized we thought the same things. Our first thought was – are we still on the Orient Express with all this rocking? Next thought: No, this is an earthquake. Next thought: It can't be that bad or last long. *Wrong. Very wrong.* For us, the thirty to forty seconds of shaking were not enough time to act. Mike noticed the cars moving in the parking lot. I fixated on a rocking bookcase and wondered if it would hit Mike if it toppled over. About the time my brain engaged to say – “let's move” – the shaking stopped and the power went out. Everyone inside looked at each other as if to say, “Was that what I think it was?” But all seemed to be okay, at least initially. A shopkeeper was the first to say that what we experienced was small, but Christchurch was hit by a significant quake. *Hummm.* Crowds of people clustered into groups outside. Some listened to a car radio, and others gathered around a battery-powered radio outside the visitor center. The grim picture began to emerge.

The quake was 6.3 – smaller than the September quake – but it was closer and, importantly, near the surface. Rumors emerged that significant damage had occurred to many buildings in downtown Christchurch, such as the Cathedral and office buildings. Roads were closed and people were being evacuated.

It's the strangest feeling – all the thoughts that converge at once – some noble and some not. Unfortunately, we're beginning to become experienced at travel during emergency conditions. We focused first on practicalities like buying water and snacks – a good lesson from Cairo – particularly since we heard reports of broken waterlines and water

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quality problems in Christchurch. Next, we wondered about transportation. Would we be able to return to Christchurch on the bus that afternoon or would all the roads be closed? And if we made it back to Christchurch, would our hotel still be standing? Visions of sleeping in the tour van or in the park (the emergency center) flashed through our minds. We slept in the Cairo airport, why not a van or a tent? Even as we were sorting out our predicament, Mike and I were increasingly conscious of the depth of destruction. Buildings in Christchurch had collapsed on top of tour buses, and people were trapped inside damaged buildings. Phones were down so that locals (like our bus driver) could not reach family members. In the face of such serious problems, it felt trivial to spend a moment worrying about our issues, but we needed to deal with our practicalities even while being sensitive to the troubles of others.

The atmosphere was grave and uncertainty hung over the huddled crowd. No one knew what to do or what to expect. We boarded our bus (our bus driver finally reached his wife to find that she and their home were safe) and started for Christchurch, not knowing how close we could get or even if the hotels would be there. We drove past beautiful coves and over hills dotted with black and white dairy cows and fluffy sheep. The calm beauty was not enough to divert troubled thoughts from crowding our minds. About six kilometers from Christchurch, we began to see damage.

Cracks appeared in the roadway, and muddy humps like large ant hills splayed out alongside the road. This was liquefaction. The normally stable fine-grained soils turned to quick sand when moist and shaken. The material oozed to the surface leaving empty space under sidewalks and roadways that then caved in. Water ran down streets from

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waterline breaks. Buildings already boarded up from the first earthquake were turned to piles of rubble. Brick walls tumbled into the street. Cars lined up at any open gas station to fill their tanks before the damaged Lyttleton port was closed. For the second time in two weeks, we saw a convoy of army vehicles rolling down city streets.

After much maneuvering, our driver got us close to downtown. We walked from there. Our hotel, the Classic Villa, was literally three blocks from Cathedral Square in the heart of the damaged area.

Mike and I hoped that we could get close. The more we walked, the more the damage escalated. Huge cracks in the pavement were encircled by orange cones. The large willow



trees were missing branches two feet in diameter. The previously quiet, clear river was swollen and muddy. It was unnerving. But it was nothing compared to what was coming. First was the sight of the Canterbury Museum. The façade had broken stones, and the statue in front was toppled off its base smashing the head. We turned the corner of our street to face the Arts Center directly across from our hotel. We ate dinner at a charming restaurant there on our first night. The façade was in shambles. Stones from the tall gabled roof shattered on the pavement below covering tables, chairs and umbrellas. Gabled ends were completely

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gone, exposing rooms with clothes hanging inside. Farther along, the side of an adjacent building collapsed. These were 1800-era buildings that added to the charm of Christchurch. The two of us walked past army vehicles as far as we could but then were stopped at the river where the day before we'd gone punting. From there, we could see the Cathedral. The gabled end with its rose window seemed fine until we realized that the tall spire was quite simply missing. *Gone*. Yesterday, its bells chimed over the crowd and today it was rubble. I can only imagine the horror of those who were in the square as it fell. Mike remembered that he took a video of the chiming bells less than forty-eight hours earlier. We replayed that video and listened with sadness while struggling to comprehend that these sounds and the happy buzz of people were now silent.

Feeling oddly empty and stunned, we returned to our hotel. Cracks ran alongside the exterior and we stepped over brick rubble from the collapsed chimney of the next door building. But – *joy!* – the hotel was open, people were inside, and our room was largely unharmed (tilted mirror, plaster dust from cracked walls, dislocated shower door). And we could stay there overnight. There would be no sleeping in the makeshift tents erected in the park.

And so began a most unusual evening. Others arrived and gathered in the large living room. Our proprietor, Peter, was there and was more concerned about caring for us than attending to his damaged, but still safe, house. Decorative items inside and outside the hotel were in pieces, bottles of alcohol were thrown onto the floor and smashed. Most of it had been cleaned up by the time we had arrived. There was no power so Peter was busily placing candles on the floor all around the dark house. The only other lights were from

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flashlights and camera flashes. No restaurants were open nor were there operable cooking facilities in the house. Everyone pitched in. We'd bought trail mix, Peter and his wife, Jan, put out cheese and crackers. Someone else made a salad with smoked mushrooms, and, thankfully, Peter provided wine. I was *very* happy for a glass – or two – of wine. Everyone had a story and everyone was uneasy. One couple was in the Arts Center as it began to come apart. I was glad we had been outside of Christchurch when the earthquake struck. We'd surely have been downtown like so many others.

We shared stories, ate what we had, drank wine, and Peter played the piano. It was almost enough to distract from the aftershocks. Peter and Jan waited for other guests to arrive and settled them in as much as possible. Before going to bed, he played one last tune on the piano and Jan sang while candles burned peacefully on the floor even as aftershocks shook the house. How hopeful to hear a cheery, "*Que sera, sera; whatever will be will be,*" fill the living room as the floor quivered and windows vibrated.

Mike and I went to bed, but with the first strong aftershock, the room rocked, the window rattled, and, afterward, the coat hangers in the closet jangled a high-pitched, tinkling sound. *Eerie*. The next aftershock shot me out of bed. I felt more stable in the new part of the house than in our room in the original section. So I curled up on the sofa under a fuzzy blanket, wearing my robe and shoes, and holding a flashlight. Candles glowed, rain splattered outside, and I tried to sleep. But each aftershock racked my nerves. They came every quarter to half-hour throughout the night. Five times they were so strong that I jumped up and ran into the center of the room away from the windows. Needless to say,

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sleep was elusive. But that's okay. Mike and I were better off than many. People – perhaps hundreds – were buried under rubble a few blocks away (the final death toll was 181). Thousands were in the makeshift camp across the street in the park – shivering in cold, crowded tents in the rain. We heard stories the next day of residents bringing clothes and offering spare bedrooms to stranded tourists who were unable to return to their hotel rooms even to get luggage. We met three people on our bus the next morning who were traveling with only the clothes they were wearing as their hotel in the city center was inaccessible.

I'll take Cairo over this. At least in Cairo, we were not the target of violence or anger. No one wanted to see tourists hurt. Tanks were there to keep peace but also to ensure protection. Even though we could hear gunshots, none of it was directed at us. As long as we stayed out of the way, the chances were good that we'd be okay. This earthquake was a completely different situation. It did not discriminate, nor could we get out of the way. It would hit when and where it chose. All Mike and I could do was hope that we weren't in the way.

Between Cairo and Christchurch, we learned several things about being in crisis situations. The first is *patience*. You just don't know – nor does anyone else – what will happen in the situation. There's no point getting excited or frustrated. Everyone is doing their best. And that's the next thing. You have to rely on the kindness of complete strangers. How many times have we seen unfortunate things in the newspaper, thought, "Oh, so sad," and turned the page? But it's real – very real. And many of those people will get through their day because of the stranger who stops on the street to help them. And finally, I learned that you can only

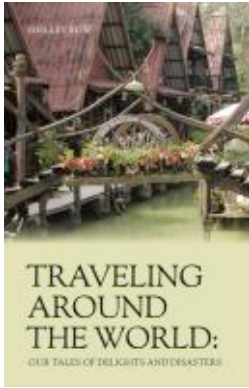


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take one step at a time – and that’s sufficient. Crisis situations are filled with unknowns – so many that you can’t sort out the future direction. Sometimes, all that’s possible is to do what seems right at that moment; get to the next place; evaluate; and make the next choice. Advance planning is a nice idea but it doesn’t work when the situation is a complete unknown.

Mike and I also learned that true customer service shines through in a crisis. We experienced it in Cairo and we saw it again here. Peter and his family suffered damage in their personal home; Peter’s daughter burst into tears when she found him safe at the Classic Villa; and yet they stayed in the Villa with us that night. Food, wine, song and words of comfort are not on their brochure, but that’s what we received. And, you know, it helped.

We are now safely away in Queenstown but the impact of this earthquake remains with us in many ways. Each rumble or creak makes us fear another quake. But more importantly, we are touched by the immensity of what happened to so many people. It took several hundred years for Christchurch to become the charming town we experienced. It took a few seconds to turn it to rubble and destroy lives, families and livelihoods. The people of Christchurch, along with others from around the world, are already clearing away the debris and moving on. It will be day by day, but – what a difference a day can make.



*Shelley and her husband, Mike, embarked on a two-month trip around the world after ten months living in France. Their meticulously planned travels didn't go as planned! They experienced the riots in Cairo, the earthquake in Christchurch, and were at a hotel in Honolulu when the tsunami roared past. Shelley's stories bring to life the delight of meditating with monks in Thailand, shearing sheep in New Zealand, and the drama of traveling through disasters.*

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