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The Thousand Mountains of Borneo

Richard Symanski

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Between 2003 and 2012, I traveled (three to four months every year) all over Southeast Asia, India, and Bangladesh. These eighteen travel essays are a selection from more than 100 that I have written during this ten-year period: on Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, and Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo. My aim was always the same: to engage as many people as I could; to have novel adventures; and to record within hours or a day what I was feeling and seeing and hearing. I wrote all of these essays on the road: in hotels, restaurants, bus and train stations, airports, even beside the road. Upon returning home, I lightly edited what I had written. I made no effort to research anything after the fact, to add authority or smartness to the essays. I sought immediacy, the mood of the moment, rawness, and my own unfiltered—however crude--feelings as they came to me. Everything in this collection of travel essays is true. I have little interest in the armchair and mannered self-serving fictions that one often gets from well-known travel writers. As will be evident, I gravitate to people who use drugs and prostitutes and who engage in immoral or unsavory behavior. In the essays in this book one meets alcoholics and embittered and dying expats in the Philippines and Bangladesh and Borneo; an American woman doing hard time in a Thai prison for smuggling heroin; weed aficionados in Thailand and Cambodia; a missionary and monks in Myanmar; bar girls in the Philippines; and a young Dyak guide in Borneo who just got married and wanted me to know everything about his sex life. I am an academic by training and I teach in a major university, but there is nothing at all academic about how I have approached my travel and these essays or how they are written, quite the contrary. They are, in an important sense, quite personal, and all about living that kind of life on the road that appeals to me more than any life I can imagine.

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