

INTRODUCTION

When I left Australia, I did not have a return air ticket, an itinerary, or any bookings of any sort in any country because I was not sure where in Southeast Asia I would go. I told my family I wanted to be a foreign correspondent, probably in the Philippines, but I didn't know how I would get there, or how long it would take.

I set off from Melbourne on a rambling journey – with Manila my destination – and happily left it to fate, luck, and intuition to fill the ‘in-between’ parts of my travels. That's the reason I titled this book ‘Meandering to Manila’ because that is what happens when you shun airplanes and choose to travel by land and sea. You get to travel on roads and rail tracks that travel up, down, and around mountains; cross farmlands and plains; negotiate swamplands, barren lands, and plateaus; pass through jungles; skirt lakes; span rivers; bypass towns; and criss-cross cities.

Topography determines where the roads and the rail lines go, and it is the depth of rivers and the ocean that determines where it's possible for ships and boats to

traverse. I like that! I like to travel on the ground, not in the air. I like to be surprised and delighted by the view from a railway carriage window, or a bus, or a truck, or from the deck of a boat, or from a tiny seat on a river canoe. I like the unexpected, not the predictable.

If you travel overland, you expect to divert, detour, and change directions. I am not a 'straight-ahead' traveller. If you want to go straight to your destination, take a plane. It's predictable, often boring, and fast. And at 35,000 feet there is not much to see. I could have boarded a plane in Melbourne and disembarked in Manila in 12 hours. But if I had done that – flown from 'A' to 'B' – everything beneath would have gone unseen. Why travel from 'A' to 'B' in the air when you have the entire alphabet to choose from on the ground? And why hurry?

I am an impetuous, impulsive, and curious traveller. For me, the destination is important, but sometimes it is how you get there and who you see and what you do along the way that's more fun, and more satisfying. Let's face it. Travel has its own momentum, a certain predictability, a reassuring familiarity and routine. Usually, but not always, I awoke most mornings knowing – or believing – where I would be at the end of the day. Most times I was right. Sometimes I was not even close, yet it didn't matter. Beyond a destination is another destination, and another, and on it goes. This 'one-day-at-a-time' travel suited me because I didn't have a travel plan. Instead, I had a map which marked where I had been, not where was going. That made me an impromptu 'spur-of-the-moment' traveller. That's why it took me 18 months to travel a most circuitous route to the Philippines. I now

realise why. Back then, in 1976, I was about to undertake the most momentous life-changing event of my life, to fulfil my vow to leave Australia, travel to the Philippines, and become a self-made foreign correspondent. It was a commitment I made to myself, way back as a 10-year-old. Now, it was up to me to turn that childhood dream into reality.

It was a prescient moment, years earlier, when I decided my journalistic future lay in the Philippines. It was a considered choice – not a dart thrown at a wall map – because I knew the Philippines was awash with stories. In some countries, a foreign correspondent can wake up and ask: is there a story today? In the Philippines, a foreign correspondent wakes up and asks: what story will I cover today?

Intuitively, as a journalist, I felt some sort of affinity with the Philippines because of its newsworthiness. I envisaged I would be there many years. But there was no rush. There was plenty to see. Things to do. I could hone my journalism along the way. And that's what I did. I travelled and I wrote. I set out to prove to myself, and to the news bosses, that I had the journalistic acuity to transition from journalist to foreign correspondent.

I made Southeast Asia my hunting ground for newspaper and magazine feature articles which I posted from remote places, and which took a couple of weeks to reach Hong Kong, Sydney, or London. I was on the lookout for stories. I took my time. Inquisitiveness and a 'nose for the newsworthy' guided me through Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, and Borneo because I wanted to experience the region up-close. I travelled by

bus, truck, plane, train, boat, cargo ship, ferry, and canoe. Everywhere I went, I travelled alone.

I may have looked like a tourist, but what I carried in my backpack made me a traveller. A unique one, too! Squashed on top of the clothes was a typewriter; a spare pack of typewriter ribbons; a small cassette recorder; two radios (AM and shortwave); two dictionaries; spare batteries; a handful of pens; and a spiral notepad. In Southeast Asia, I learned 'on-the-spot' journalism. It was my foreign correspondent baptism.

What happened in the year-and-a-half before I reached Manila is the subject of this book. It is about the sights I saw, the things I did, and the people I met. I didn't keep a diary. But I did write lots and lots of letters to my parents back home in Australia, and they wrote lots and lots of letters to me.

For almost 50 years, those letters in a shoebox – passed on to me by my parents when I eventually returned home after 13 years – remained unread, virtually forgotten, until I retrieved them from the back of a cupboard in the hope that they would bring back memories that would help me write this book. They certainly did.