



I'll Follow the Sun

Expat writer Kim Gravelle has only had one vacation in the last 30 years—and he's still on it.

BY VICKY GOMELSKY

One steamy night a few months ago, Kim Gravelle finally succumbed to the rat race. Literally. Stranded in a tiny guest house in the Solomon Islands, a tropical outpost filled with jungle-choked WWII memorabilia and not much else, the writer-photographer awoke to the sounds of rodents snacking on the T-shirt he had carelessly dribbled tuna juice on. Problem was, he was still in it. "I finally just said, 'You can have it!'" he remembers. "And they ate it."

For the past quarter century, a typical day at the office for Gravelle has been very different from one of yours or mine, featuring kava sessions with Fijian villagers, trips up fire-breathing volcanoes in Vanuatu, coffee breaks in Tahitian cafes or chewing the fat—or betel nut, as the case may be—with Solomon Islanders on a lazy South Pacific afternoon. Sure, it's a tough life, but why does this guy get to live it?

A jealous observer might just say Gravelle got lucky. Plunking down in Fiji in 1974, fresh from a four-year stint on Papua New Guinea, he began editing a handful of South Pacific in-flight magazines. All offered paid access to tongue-twisting, palm-fringed Edens such as Nukualofa, Funafuti and Navuniivi in exchange for a quarterly contribution of feature stories. Life has been very good since. Gravelle jets off to Bora Bora one day, Vanuatu the next, with just a bit of strategic courting of immigration officials in between for a never-ending train of work permits.

Awarded Fijian citizenship a few

years back, the former Michigan resident is philosophical about the career he's carved out of island-hopping. "I've purposefully been on holiday for 30 years," he concedes with a laugh. And the proof's in print. *Romancing the Islands*, an assortment of anecdotes he collected while on assignment, is a primer on how to find adventure living what you love.

There's the time he spent eight days as unofficial first mate for Bill Verity,



Gravelle and fan club, the Solomons.

a modern-day adventurer trying to recreate Captain Bligh's inauspicious voyage across the Pacific in an exact replica of the *Bounty* launch. From Tonga, the actual site of the mutiny, the pair endured the rains and the rays in an open boat whose only allowance to comfort was uncushioned wooden benches. When they sighted Fiji, Gravelle, a Fletcher Christian for the '70s, respectfully disembarked.

Other assignments took him to the fringes of archipelagoes to bring back tales from a South Pacific undiscovered by Club Med. Like the time he teetered

on the "rim of creation" for a story about Yasur, Vanuatu's belching and spewing volcano, or canvassed Guadalcanal—still haunted by "the overpowering force of a thousand ghosts"—and found Aaron Kumana, one of the guardian angels who came to John F. Kennedy's rescue after his PT 109 crew was sunk off Plum Pudding Island.

Gravelle's employers have even condoned drinking on the job, provided he didn't down so much kava that he couldn't get the details straight later. Besides, partaking of the grog bowl is only the polite thing to do when socializing with Pacific Islanders, who tend to drink Gravelle under the tapa mat at these sessions. "Soon after the sixth or seventh *bilo* (cup), my nose bumped the dirt," he writes about one such evening in far-flung Rotuma, Fiji's answer to the Emerald City.

Born in northern Michigan, Gravelle grew up knowing that "if I ever had a chance to forgo shoveling snow, I would." His first signs of wanderlust came at age 19, when he spent six months motorcycling across Europe, surviving on wild lemons in tight times.

Back in the States, Gravelle and his new wife headed to Oregon, where he flirted with yuppiedom while working as a journalist. The familiar rhythms of the nine-to-five seduced him for several years until divorce nudged him to break out the passport again. This time he chose the balmy South Seas as his next port of call.

But Gravelle's Pacific odyssey didn't start so well. He set off for New Zealand, lured by visions of an exotic Polynesian heritage. Auckland's urban pace and chilly breezes didn't live up, so he skipped to Tasmania, where he lucked into a job on a lobster boat. That romance, however, faded just as quickly. "Outside the harbor, it didn't take but 20 minutes before I realized I'd made a dreadful error," recalls Gravelle, flashing back to the unforgiving waters of the Southern Ocean. "It got to the point where I was lying on the deck, and I thought, if they just roll me off into the sea, I don't care."

Feet firmly planted on soil, Gravelle set his compass for Darwin, the hottest and driest spot he could think of, and after that made his way to Melbourne, where he started writing for an oil-industry magazine. The publication sent him to Papua New Guinea for a story on oil exploration in the Gulf of Papua. "They stuck me in a helicopter, took me 300 to 400 miles somewhere, dropped me off on a riverbank, and there was a long canoe waiting with men to paddle it," remembers Gravelle. "We started up the river, and crocodiles were slipping off the bank and pythons were hanging out over the river."

Gravelle settled in PNG, working for a while as an overseer for a local copper mine and cocoa plantation. It was around then that relations between the laborers and a fellow manager of Gravelle's, a harsh man known for his quick backhand and cruel tongue, reached the breaking point. "It was fairly intense. They finally burned his house down and cut him up into bits when he came out," Gravelle explains, in a tone no more agitated than if he were talking about his favorite coconut recipe.

His coworker's untimely demise did not faze Gravelle, who remained in Papua New Guinea for years, eventually acquiring a taste—or at least a tolerance—for barbecued crocodile skewers ("a firm white meat with a rich, sweet taste"). But as the country gained independence from Australia in the mid-1970s, expats were no longer welcome. In 1974, Gravelle was sent packing, sure of only one thing: His next home would be surrounded by water.

"It's a love of warm, tropical, green places and lush vegetation," he allows. "I've always sought a simpler lifestyle, without traffic and taxicabs and crowds. I'm totally happy in a village, sitting cross-legged on a mat and having a bowl of grog."

That same year, a help-wanted sign requesting an editor at the brand new *Fiji Sun* persuaded him to go Melanesian. Since then, he's operated from his hub in Suva, Fiji's capital, where he lives with his wife Sisilia, a champion cyclist and triathlete, and their 17-year-old son Gabriel. The Gravelle home has been likened to a mini-museum of the South Pacific, full of keepsakes from the patriarch's island hopscotch.

But all the cool knickknacks in the world don't always make up for the shortcomings of living in the middle of the ocean, far removed from a decent Pavarotti selection or crackers smothered with Camembert. "Never mind Disneyland," says Gravelle about his infrequent trips back to the mainland. "Just walking through a huge supermarket and seeing all the produce and the candies—wow."

What Fiji lacks in groceries, however, it makes up for in people. "We simply can't walk on a little dirt road without having villagers come dashing out saying, 'Come have a cup of tea,'" Gravelle boasts. "That's why I like going to Vanua Levu or Taveuni. There, the roads are still dirt, they don't get TV and they don't have a McDonald's yet."

But for all his good fortune—most of it made by putting himself out there—Gravelle has also had more than his share of bad luck. In 1990, he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. Told by doctors in Melbourne that he had only a few years to live, Gravelle went back to Fiji and promptly resumed business as usual. The sky was still blue, as far as he could see.

"I don't live under a black cloud. I totally ignore it," he declares. His only concession to the disease is the metal walking poles he uses to help him get around. "Every couple of years, I dig the wheelchair out and try to derust it, but I won't sit down in it. I'm not terribly superstitious, but I think that would just be wrong."

Maybe regular excursions to places the rest of us only dream about are tonic enough. When I got back, it took a couple months to get rid of all the chigger bites and all the creatures that had crawled under my skin," says Gravelle of the ill-fated trip to the Solomons, where rats confiscated his shirt.

But even horrible trips, he notes, are worth savoring. "Just getting out there gives me that edge of feeling like I'm still participating. I've been lucky to come here and do just that."

And a whole lot luckier, Gravelle points out, than a guy dreaming about two weeks in the sun while shoveling snow off a driveway somewhere in Michigan. For this island romancer, 30 years out of the cold makes good sense.

"I'm not going anywhere else." ☪



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