

Around the World

By Christine Means, former World Savvy intern

On November 22, 2006 we arrived back “home” in Barcelona after traveling for ten months in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. To celebrate our homecoming, we packed in a ridiculously elaborate, luxuriously filling dinner followed by a cake-like concoction oozing with steaming chocolate sauce. The next morning we woke up rubbing our eyes and stumbled jetlagged to the hospital to see the birth of our first niece. This is the story of our trip: luck. We always seemed to be in the right place at the right time (which involved a lot of avoiding being in the wrong place at the wrong time).

During the course of our journey, we were present at a terrorist bomb blast in India that took place three platforms from where we were waiting in the train station; we rescheduled our plane ticket from Indonesia to leave a week earlier, narrowly escaping the earthquake, tsunami, and volcano eruption in Java; we arrived to a library in New Zealand to look up travel information seconds after a minivan had crashed into the library, destroying one wall and obliterating the travel book section that had once hung there.

But luck is a concept that’s hard to pin down. Since returning from the trip, by far the most common remark we have heard is, “You’re so lucky!” This exclamation makes me bristle for two reasons. First, the majority of the people who made this comment could do a similar trip if they made it a priority in their lives. My initial reaction is always to steal the words of Margaret Thatcher – of all people! – and respond haughtily, “I wasn’t lucky. I deserved it.” Moreover, ironically, the speakers were, without exception, from the privileged class of economically powerful, Western countries, making them members of the luckiest population in the world. The truly unlucky we encountered on a daily basis during our travels, crouched in appallingly filthy doorways and hobbling through eternally dust-filled streets on hand-made crutches. I guess what I’m saying is, to quote an old NPR favorite, Garrison Keillor, “Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have got it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.”

It’s hard to find a dignified path between the embarrassingly reductionist “moral” of the story and the extraction of some kind of meaningful conclusion after such a rich and rewarding adventure. In a nutshell: As an intelligent, informed person of an increasingly global world, I didn’t need to make a round the world trip to become intellectually aware of my own “lucky” position as a middle class American. However, while I was certainly conscious of the existence of economic, cultural, and political inequities on a global level, now I feel it – every day I see something that reminds me of the fact in some significant way, and I think that this is the first step to becoming some kind of active “global citizen”. I’m not saying everyone has to make a round the trip to come to reach this conclusion, but that’s what it took for me.