

Interview

Maria Coffey: Explorer of the Infinite

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MARIA COFFEY HAS WRITTEN EIGHT INTERNATIONALLY published travel books and four books for children. Her most recent, *Explorers of the Infinite* (2008 Tarcher/Penguin), focuses on extreme athletes and the spiritual experiences they had reaching their own edges in the wild. An inveterate traveller and explorer herself, I was curious to know how Maria saw her own life in terms of spiritual experience. In 2000, she and her husband, the photographer Dag Goering, created

Hidden Places, a boutique adventure travel company offering high-quality guided expeditions in some of the world's most inspiring places.

I met with Maria in a coffee shop in Victoria before she headed off to Thailand with Dag and caught up with her again during their journey through Laos. Maria embodies the adventurous spirit; open, engaged and alive. Her enthusiasm for what she does is infectious—it was all I could do not to pack my bags and go with her.

ROOM: I just finished *Explorers of the Infinite* and was struck by the lengths that some athletes will go to get a sense of connection in the world around them. Do you think that the urge to travel comes from the same place?

MC: It's different for everyone, of course, but for me it's a mix of curiosity about other places and people, and the desire to connect with them. I love that moment when I arrive in another country, step off the plane or out of the airport, and breathe in different air. Because it is uniquely different everywhere, be it New Delhi, Vientiane, Hanoi, Dubrovnik, Buenos Aires, Quito. At that moment, I begin the process of stepping into a wholly different culture, an experience to which I'm addicted. Even if, as is often the case, I am returning to a place where I've travelled a lot before, there is still that exquisite jolt of adjustment. The adventure is about exploring, learning about, and adjusting to the other culture and reaching points of connection with it.

ROOM: In the book you talk about the strong sense of spirituality the athletes experience in nature. Have you had similar experiences in your travels?

MC: Not just in my travels, but in every day of my life. My personal spirituality is about a deep connection with the natural world, and I try to find that connection wherever I am. When I'm home in Canada, I find it cycling through Victoria, marvelling at the trees that line the roads, the shifting light on the ocean, the ever-changing sky. Up on the small island where I spend most of my summers, I find it particularly in the ocean: first thing every morning I plunge in for a swim, and it's truly like a blessing. On our travels and the trips we lead: where to start! In the Galapagos Islands just about every moment is charged with spirituality. Watching tiny penguins swim by when you are snorkelling, coming eye to eye with an albatross sitting calmly on its nest, observing a male flightless cormorant bringing 'presents' of seaweed to its mate ... the beauty of these creatures and the fact that they accept us among them without fear offer profound hits of that deep connection with nature.

But I really believe that you don't have to travel far to find the connection. It can happen in your back yard or on your balcony: what could be more elemental than sowing a seed, nurturing the growing plant, eating its fruits or enjoying its flowers? The key is to be open to the miracle.

ROOM: You've been travelling in Southeast Asia for a few months. What situations have been the most challenging for you?

MC: Recently, in Cambodia, we visited our Canadian friends Rick and Adrienne who have a charity called KIDS, assisting some of the poorest of the poor in Southeast Asia. One of the projects they support in Siem Reap is New Hope, which runs a free school and clinic and offers support to families in Mondul 3, the worst slum area of the city. We spent one morning with Rick and Adrienne at the New Hope Centre and visited families with them in Mondul 3. Over the years Dag and I have witnessed a lot of dire poverty but this was truly gut wrenching. A naked child, his skin covered in sores, trying to catch a fish in a sewage-filled stream ... just one of countless heartbreaking scenes, compounded by hearing the stories of the individual families.

Keeping that experience in mind has made it far easier to meet the usual challenges of travel, such as the many local bus rides we've been taking,

here in Laos. For five hours one day, aboard a rattling, hot, dust-filled bus in Laos, I was stuck on the back seat in the middle of a family: mother on one side of me, father on the other, and on either side of them several seriously motion-sick children. There were not enough plastic sick bags to go around, so the half-full ones were being constantly passed from one group of children to another, always via me. But the family was friendly, and at the end of it, sweaty, grimy, cramped and feeling rather sick myself by then, I got to stay in a guest house, have a shower and a good meal ... what is there to complain about?

ROOM: You mentioned that your trip down the Ganges was one of your more indelible experiences. Could you explain what it was like and why it was so powerful?

MC: In 1992, during a year-long worldwide kayaking expedition, Dag and I arrived in India to embark on a six-week journey down India's River Ganges, between the holy cities of Hardwar and Varanasi. We had chosen the Ganges as our destination because, according to Hindu belief, it is the soul of India, a river which is said to embody a goddess, Mother Ganga, and have the power of physical and spiritual purification. When we flew into New Delhi, however, we found little encouragement for our venture. The consensus of opinion among the people we spoke to was that the river was a dangerous place, that its water would make us sick, that the bandits along its banks would attack us, and that we were "potty" to even consider such an idea. And it often did seem insane: when we were chased by a bandit brandishing a rifle, when our kayak bumped into corpses floating in the river, when, numerous times, we paddled past cremations along the river banks, the smell of burning flesh and hair filling our nostrils. Yet, during the journey, I reached a profound sense of connection with the river. Every day, I witnessed local people and sadhus worshipping Mother Ganga, fully immersing themselves three times in the water to receive her blessing and protection. These people didn't think we were potty. They insisted we were on a pilgrimage, because we were travelling down the holy river between two holy cities in a boat that was red, the holy colour of Hinduism. They said the river would protect us, and purify all we ate and drank. Soon, I began to believe them. Like the villagers and sadhus, I bathed in the Ganges, and made offerings every day. I sometimes drank water straight from the river. I was never sick. I truly did feel protected. And when our journey was

over, leaving the Ganges was an enormous wrench. From the ghats at Varanasi, watching my last flower offering bob away on the current, I thanked Mother Ganga for our safe passage along her.

ROOM: There's a quote you mentioned that you carry with you. Where did you discover it and why does it mean so much to you?

MC: The quote is from Pico Iyer. I love his work and I came across the quote in one of his essays: "We travel most, I mean to say, when we stumble, and we stumble most when we come to a place of poverty and need (like Haiti, perhaps, or Cambodia); and what we find in such confounding places, often, is that it is the sadness that makes the sunshine more involving or, as often, that it is the spirit and optimism of the place that make the difficulties more haunting."

ROOM: You've written many books about your adventures. Does the urge to write come out of wanting to share these experiences?

MC: Yes, but it's also been a way of encapsulating the experiences for myself and Dag. A way of remembering and honouring them. Right now I'm taking a break from writing, and I find myself not following my usual routine, which is making frantic scribbles in a notebook throughout the day to capture events, snatches of conversations, things seen in passing. I miss that process! But it seems I need to have a book in mind in order to be so compelled.

ROOM: What's the best piece of advice you've been given?

MC: This isn't a dress rehearsal: live now!

ROOM: You have chosen such an interesting life, Maria! What have been the most difficult and rewarding times, and would you recommend it?

MC: Some of the most difficult times, like our journey down the River Ganges, have been the most rewarding. Funny how life works that way. Right now we're establishing Elephant Earth Initiative, a non-profit organisation to help wild and captive elephants, which is filled with a whole new set of challenges and rewards. Would I recommend my lifestyle? Hey, each to their own! It's been and still is a rollercoaster ride. But I wouldn't swap it for anything.