

*Travel paints a detailed picture of lands never before seen.
In addition, for Alice, connecting with local
communities deepens and enriches
the experience.*

The People in Between

Alice Zyetz

as we were shopping for the last time in the *gigante* supermarket in San Miguel before we left Mexico, a woman came up to us and said, “It was such a pleasure having you here. I wish you a safe journey back to the States.”

She looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember her name or where we had met. Was it through folk music, bridge, little theater, play-reading, Torah study, Unity meditation, Unitarian services, singing for the children at the *Biblioteca*, ushering at the jazz festival? As I ran through the checklist, I realized how much we had become part of the community in the three months we were there, even though we also found time to be tourists, attending Mexican fiestas, sightseeing, and socializing with the people in our RV park.

Besides the freedom of RVing, the beautiful scenery, the other travelers, and the sightseeing, I love the ability we have to meet local people and get a sense of their life. I grew up in New York City and moved to Los Angeles when I was twenty-five. I had met people from some of the states in between and read books about them, but I never really could picture their lives until I started traveling. I had to be in

Mountain View, Arkansas, to see the eighty-year-olds and their great-grandchildren dancing traditional square dance patterns to the music of the folks in their well-worn overalls, who were playing fiddles, banjos, guitars, and harmonicas. Or meet the fisherman on the wharf in Inverness, Nova Scotia, where we were parked, who gave us fresh mackerel because he had extra and wanted us to experience the taste. We couldn't miss sharing pizza in the dining room of the square dancer couple in Tehachapi, California, who invited us to stay on their property when we called asking if they knew of a large Wal-Mart parking area where we could stay the night.

We connect with the local communities through our main interests: bridge, music, square dancing, and Jewish congregations. We have national directories for all four and when we have access to the Net, we can find even more information—actually too much information. Other travelers I've met establish a local presence by pursuing their own interests: twelve-step communities, various churches, Habitat for Humanity builds, contra dancing, compassionate communication circles.

Bridge was always a friendly game for us. When we lived in our stick house, we had a group of sixteen regulars and met once a month in someone's home. We played seven rounds of bridge, ate seven rounds of snacks and desserts, and caught up with each other's lives in between mouthfuls. When we decided to go on the road, we knew we would miss the regular bridge playing so we practiced going to bridge clubs in Los Angeles to get our fix. We were devastated. First of all we were strangers. Nobody smiled. The only thing they talked about was what they should have done in the previous hand. We were there to hold the cards so they could beat us, which they did rather consistently. One time we won big on one hand (out of twenty-eight) and I had the audacity to look happy. Big mistake. The opponents argued with each other about who was to blame for this unfortunate circumstance. For a long time we avoided playing in clubs, but we were desperate. How delightful to discover that in other parts of the country, the bridge players welcome newcomers and thank us for coming.

One bridge highlight was in Mammoth Lakes, California. We had planned to spend a few days sightseeing. Looking through the local paper,

I discovered that there was a bridge group meeting the next night. We went and found a group of people who played several times a week, had potlucks, socialized together, had lessons once a week. The teacher even had a huge awning he set up and invited us to join the group to watch the local Fourth of July parade. We dragged ourselves away ten days later only because we had a big family gathering to attend. We were in people's homes, had a sense of their lives, and knew we would always be welcome to return.

Our music also serves as a gateway to local people. We both sing and play folk instruments. Over the years we have accumulated a diverse repertoire (about four songs per genre) so that we can fit in with most amateur musicians we find. In Tecopa, California, we played in a pick-up dance band with other musicians who were passing through. In Port Aransas, Texas, we saw a sign for a jam session at the local bar, joined them, and had a great night of music. I am not a beer drinker, but that night it seemed appropriate to keep my throat moistened with a bottle of Shiner Bock, Texas Hill Country's best.

We lead singalongs. We were at a campground in eastern Washington and the manager told me that he used to play guitar. When I offered him mine, he declined saying that he wouldn't remember anything. I insisted and of course he played better than I ever will. The next morning his wife came by to thank us for the music, not only for the singalong, but also for encouraging her husband. She went on to say that their daughter had been killed in an accident the year before and this was the first time since then he had made any music.

One Saturday in Minnesota, we had stopped at a living history exhibit and spoke to the singer-storyteller who had been performing. He plays music at his father-in-law's church and invited us to come and play old gospel music with them the next day. "Just park your RV on the church grounds tonight," he said. There we were the next morning, in a little country church, leading "I'll Fly Away" and "Amazing Grace" and this was years before *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*

One of the biggest challenges for me as a Jew was the lack of religious community. Although born Jewish, I didn't find community until I was

forty when I joined a temple in Los Angeles and became involved in the choir and adult study, as well as with a *Havurah*, an extended temple family. I knew full-timing would leave a gap in my traveling life, since there are relatively few Jewish RVers.

I did have some disappointments. One year I failed to buy the special-sized Hanukkah candles when I was in a Jewish neighborhood a few weeks earlier. So there I was in a market in a small town the night before and the checker told me to ask the manager who sent me over to the section where they sold votive candles, since those were the only religious candles he knew. Okay, birthday candles did work although they wobbled a bit in the *menorah*, the special candelabra. I just had to make sure I didn't move the menorah, kept it away from the window blinds, and watched it very, very carefully.

Another year at Passover, I wanted to be at a family *Seder* in someone's home as I had been every year since 1966. We were in Florida at the time and didn't know anyone in that area. So I started calling temples, but all they had available were large catered dinners at hotels, which lacked the family spirit I was seeking. I was disappointed. I knew if it were my temple's office and a traveler was asking to be included, they would have called any number of families who would have gladly made room for the stranger. But it was not to be and I felt bereft. I finally called a Jewish bookstore and must have sounded so needy that the woman I spoke to took my name and said she would see what she could do. She called back and said that her in-laws couldn't come to the small temple Seder and would we come in their place. We were introduced to many people, made to feel very welcome, and asked about our life on the road as wandering Jews.

After those experiences, I realized I needed to be more proactive. I stocked up on Hanukkah candles, *gefulte fish*, and matzoh ball ingredients whenever I saw them, bought a book called *Traveling Jewish in the USA*, and subscribed to several Internet newsletters so I could study Torah (first five books of the Bible) every Saturday no matter where I was. I also took advantage of Friday night services in areas that had small temples. Since these were small congregations, I stood out as an unfamiliar face. People would come over to welcome me and ask if I had just moved there. When they found out that I traveled and it was *my* one-ton Dodge Dually parked

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in the lot, they were even more curious about how a nice Jewish “girl” could love this lifestyle. It sparked lots of wonderful conversation.

Perhaps the richest experience for me was when we went to San Miguel, Mexico. We traveled to the Yucatan at the end of January and were planning to be in San Miguel around Easter for the celebrations. That year Passover came in the same week. On the way to the Yucatan, we met an American couple who were living permanently in San Miguel. Not to make the same mistake that I did in Florida, I asked (rather timidly) if they knew of any Jewish people in San Miguel. “Are you kidding?” they said. “There are two Jewish communities, one traditional and one more liberal.”

I couldn’t believe it. They gave me the names of two people to contact. When we arrived that spring, I called immediately and became immersed in the community. I actually went to both Seders, but my heart was with the liberal community. We had Torah study on Saturday mornings, some Friday night dinners, and an introduction to many cultural activities individual members were involved in. Of course Chuck and I sang with them, and they invited us to come back that fall to lead the music for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Which we did—and stayed for three months.

And so our travels go. We’ve gotten to see lands in between Los Angeles and New York as well as some of Canada and Mexico. These places have come alive as people have taken us into their lives and communities. Our hearts are filled with the color of the landscape and the lives of the people have given it a depth we never expected. Our lives have been enriched; we hope we have done the same for them.

Alice Zyetz and husband Chuck have lived full-time on the road since 1994. Their interests are varied. They love to travel but don’t move very fast. People have commented that they leave “at the crack of noon.” In addition to being co-editor of this book, Alice, while traveling, published another book, You Shoulda Listened to Your Mother: 36 Timeless Success Tips for Working Women (available at Amazon.com). Alice also contributed “The Saturday Solution.”