

2009 Spirit of Adventure Award: -Danna Mead-



Danna in Chiang Mai, Thailand

For Danna Mead, travelling isn't just a getaway, it's a way of life. This world traveler has amassed extended stays in a long list of countries, including Thailand, Nepal, Hong Kong, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Tibet, Singapore, Italy, Guatemala, England, Scotland, France, New Zealand, and Honduras. She is also an avid scuba diver who has traveled to great dive sites, and has even completed a cross-country bike trek. More impressive, though, many of these trips were done as solo expeditions.

Danna's first solo trip was to Thailand in 1996. She was inspired by reading the story of another woman who had been travelling alone, and decided that a 3-week trip on her own would be a good way to test the idea. As her departure date got close, though, Danna almost cancelled the entire trip because she was so frightened by the idea of being in such a foreign country on her own. In spite of her fears, Danna took the trip as planned, and she was rewarded with an experience beyond what she could have hoped for. In Thailand, the people she met were very welcoming and friendly. She found it easy to travel through the country on her own. It was this trip, Danna says, that planted the seed in her mind to go on even longer solo trips, including a 6 month trek through Asia in 2000.

Despite the obvious concerns of a woman travelling alone, Danna hasn't experienced anything too harrowing. There have been a few rougher moments, however, including taking the wrong bus and ending up in the middle

of nowhere alone, as well as trying to sleep under the seat of an 11-hour overnight train in Indonesia while the kid in front of her was getting sick. “The worst part was having no one to laugh about it with,” Danna says.

For Danna, the amazing experiences she has had throughout her travels far outweigh the inconvenient negatives. Overall, Danna has found that as a solo female traveler, it has been very easy to meet people, especially locals. “The local people seem interested,” she says. “And less intimidated.”

When asked about her favorite places that she has been, Danna first mentions Thailand, partly because it was the first place she made a solo journey. Since that trip in 1996, Danna has revisited Thailand many times. Like so many travelers, she feels the need to return to those places with which she has made a connection. Also among her favorite places are Nepal and Tibet, which she describes as “magical.”



Danna in Tibet

Even in her daily life, Danna is actively involved in travelling. She works as the Program Director for New Directions Travel, a non-profit organization that provides high-quality local, national, and international travel vacations and holiday programs for people with mild to moderate developmental disabilities. She also volunteers as a speaker for HI-USA’s very own World Travel 101 workshops given at the Santa Monica hostel.

As someone whose professional life is deeply involved in travel, Danna says it is surprisingly easy to keep her personal travel fresh and exciting. “Work is work,” she says. “On those trips, I don’t go off on my own.” Due to the nature of her job, the tours she leads for New Directions involve private buses and nicer hotels than Danna would usually stay in on her personal trips. Because of this, her work-related travels are more isolated from the local culture than her personal ones. “When I travel alone, it’s more low-budget,” she adds. “I stay in hostels and try to meet people.” If there is a particular place Danna wants to visit, she avoids going there for work before she has had the chance to immerse herself in the culture on her own.

By embracing foreign cultures, Danna says it is very interesting to see the difference between the general American perception of another country, and her own personal experiences. According to Danna, this is especially true for countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, which are predominantly Muslim. She says that she has learned to not judge places she doesn’t know. In addition, Danna says that once she has experienced another country and its culture, such as Tibet, she finds herself much more interested when that place is in the news.



Danna with local children in Tibet

When asked about the biggest lessons she has learned as a world traveler, Danna simply says, “I don’t know anything.” She goes on to explain that with there being so much that we don’t know about other people and places, you have to travel with an open mind. “But no matter how different a place is, there are still things we have in common,” Danna adds, “like the way kids smile and play.”

On a more personal level, travelling alone has challenged Danna to be more outgoing. “I don’t think about the things I can’t do,” she says. “I think in terms of what I haven’t done yet.”

Danna still has a long list of places that she would like to see but hasn’t yet, including South America and Africa. Even as this article was being written, Danna was heading off to Puerto Rico.

The Los Angeles Council of HI-USA is pleased to present Danna with its Spirit of Adventure Award. The award will be given, along with a presentation by Danna about her travels, at the Annual Members Meeting at the Santa Monica hostel on June 7 at 12:30 p.m.



On the Mekong River near the Thailand/Laos border