

TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHED



MATT HARRISON shares how being in nature opens him to wonder and meaning for his life.

While we all have varying degrees of spiritual awareness, I believe that it is a challenge to make it a priority in our daily lives.

Spirituality is something I have always had some awareness of but haven't always considered deeply. Despite the fact that it seems elusive, it has a feeling of connection which is intangible but undeniable.

For me, this feeling of spiritual connection is most profound during moments of solitude in the natural environment. Sitting on a surfboard waiting for a wave, hearing the call of the ruru as the stars shine brightly, watching the sun burn low as it sets in the west over the Tasman Sea. On such occasions a sense of spirit is ignited within my soul.

This feeling is only surpassed when it is shared with

Matt Harrison, 31, is a geography and social studies teacher at Orewa College. "The outdoors is my place of worship and I love getting out to surf or into the bush."



someone — someone with a kindred spirit. At such times this feeling is amplified as my heart and soul feel full and my spirit burns infinitely bright.

At times it feels that the spirit of the universe conspires to give a sign of clarity, of reassurance or direction. I have always had faith in these signs in my journey through life. They have enabled me to meet good people, make good friends and arrive at awe-inspiring places.

A New Path

Several years ago I made a conscious decision to change my life to pursue a career as a high school geography teacher.

My hope was to lead a more fulfilling life and to create a learning environment in which students could continually seek understanding of the many mysteries of Earth. Equipped with new lenses with which to see the world, they too will become storytellers.

As young storytellers they give voices to the all too often voiceless and become advocates for well-considered decisions in this fast-paced world.

With so much information so readily available, many people still see the world with their eyes wide shut. Therefore, I feel a profound sense of accomplishment even when I have merely promoted an awareness of these mysteries among students. In essence evoking such an awareness is surely a spiritual awakening.

Making this decision led to an extraordinary opportunity. Last summer I was chosen by the Enderby Trust to travel with Heritage Expeditions aboard the *Spirit of Enderby* through the sub-Antarctic and ultimately to Antarctica.

It still surprises me to think that I was one of the fortunate few who had the privilege of visiting the frozen continent and telling stories of the southern sea and ice.

The Journey

We set off from Bluff, sailing through the roaring forties, the furious fifties and the screaming sixties, stopping along the way at some of the majestic sub-Antarctic Islands. An abundance of rich green flora and the enchanting sound of bird calls thrive in splendid isolation. An overwhelming sense of life, vitality and spirit emanates here.

Finally we push through the Antarctic Circle into the silent seventies where icebergs solemnly drift, set on their



course of dissolution to join the ocean from which they had come. On one such iceberg an emperor penguin rides north with the currents until his vessel is gone and he continues his pilgrimage to sea, only to return the following winter.

The approach to the frozen continent is in stark contrast to the islands we have visited. It exists on the horizon as an epic expanse both barren and desolate.

Now the sun does not set. It simply circles the horizon, casting seemingly eternal reflections off the crystal clear, calm water. It is beautiful yet dangerous, the mind is not equipped for this . . . Fortunately we have the luxury of curtains so our routine is maintained, allowing introspective reflection at dusk on the events of the day.

It is difficult to imagine what this would be like through winter when the sun doesn't rise above the horizon and there is only darkness. I have no doubt that this would result in other challenges to mind, body and soul.

Landing

Stepping onto the land, however, all such thoughts are forgotten. There is an energy here — such an ancient and inhospitable environment yet so pristine and pure, so invigorating.

I climb a hill, relatively small in the context of the surroundings, and crouch at its peak, hands on hips, as I struggle for breath and lean into the face of the katabatic winds. I slowly rise and look out over the Ross Ice Shelf. Words escape me. By whose design does such beauty exist? I'm alone and yet I'm not. I take people with me both living and dead; their spirits stand with me — and it's brilliant.

Returning

As we sail back the sun finally begins to set. Southern royal albatross soar effortlessly above the ship escorting our return passage. These birds are surely kaitiaki (guardians) of this place. To behold them in their domain is humbling. As I stare into the sky following their movements a feeling of melancholy settles upon me. They have travelled far and wide, they have spoken to the wind and they know



they are losing, that there are too many threats to their way of life.

I return to Bluff confused. I have had the trip of a life time, I have had a life-changing experience, but what does this mean? How do I act on this? How do I make my life-changing experience, life changing for others?

I don't really like to admit it, but a part of me begins to hold this experience close, not wanting to share it with just anyone. Perhaps to be drawn to the solitude of such vast and uninhabited landscapes is a character trait that rarely coexists with the trait of being the unrelenting town crier.

I wonder whether it is in the best interest of Antarctica to be left out of sight and therefore out of mind of the masses. Promoting it in our capitalist world increases the risk of it being exploited under the guise of development. As one of the few


remaining untouched landscapes this would be devastating.

Unfortunately, Antarctica is well known to those who are in the best position to take advantage of its resources. Therefore, shining the light on what is currently occurring, or could occur, may be the best defence against exploitation. People must be informed so they will no longer be ignorant or deny the impact of human interference.

Knowing

I have been touched by the spirit, wonder and mystery of the southern ocean and Antarctica. I must share my story to enable connection and evoke consciousness in others so that they will choose to become kaitiaki of this sacred place. 🌀

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