

THE POVERTY TOURS

Ken Poyner

Allison did not want one of the standard tours—one that simply whisked you out into the populace for a day and then back: nothing left by day's end except the smell of listless light wrestling with grime and animated soot, perhaps the sting of a small child's cry left in the crook of one's elbow. No. She wanted the full tour, the in-your-face experience, the exposure that would leave a person rubbing unconsciously the insides of her thigh for days, chewing her food ever harder as any meal wore on: a tour that had real edges, a voice that scolded. Hardship. Disease. Hunger. Privation. All the things that separate a *them* from an *us*.

She could have taken a tour near home. Instead, she chose to fly to one of those countries whose spelling nearly everyone had to look up—if they recognized the name at all. A flat land with no coasts and fields as dry as the breasts of a septuagenarian, where the rivers back up and when they flow, will do so

only violently. The airport was like any airport, modeled in a style that would appeal to those with the money to fly, made to look like it processed people instead of profit, made to look worried with comfort rather than fuel costs, made to look as though no one died in its construction.

Her hotel was in the arc of life surrounding the air park—a ring one or two sets of buildings deep, with the air concourse at the center as a bulls-eye, and harboring all the accommodations air travelers need, including a series of tourist and business and smuggler services. Many visitors never get much beyond these sanitized rings, and souvenir shops wait in the lobbies of all the hotels and are piled in the exit corners of restaurants and on the bottom shelves of convenience stores, and tall prostitutes fortified with ample food and western clothing lean outside of the bars one street back and speak a language made up of a dozen languages all with the same limping prayers and unhinged oaths.

These were all places where one could feel better, but she wanted to feel good.

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So she booked a tour from the concierge. Not one of the standard tours that ran two miles inland, paraded the tourist through a village erected just to

fit the tourist trade, loaded with professional beggars and a fresh crew of starving children every morning and a howling miasma of painted child prostitutes and old men selling charms made out of their former wives' pelvis bones. No, she wanted to get past the tourist ring and into the real countryside, where people were made of uneven angles and held disharmonies without corruption and true victims of chance might starve in front of her and children would kill each other for the opportunity to steal the contents of her backpack. She wanted to go where the guides did not carry guns to give her the false impression of danger but to make for themselves a safe exit if they had to surrender her to the needing mob, giving up the tip they were expecting she would triumphantly leave, just to make it home to their wives in the apartment block made of the dung harvested from the people's stringy livestock and sold to in-town builders as quality brick. The hair at the back of her neck would stand up at the idea of seeing the real thing, the real state of this world, and feeling the wonderful rush of knowing it was a different world than hers. The feel of fresh linen is never so good as just after you have watched someone sleep on dirt because there is not enough straw. Her fingers, ever since her decision to take the tour, had been alive like hyper-sexed spiders and could be nothing

but playful all through breakfast and even later; they eagerly skinned the biting light of the lobby while she waited for the bus.

While most tourists were content to simply go to the sham village and began loading in their migratory numbers at the primary bus stand, there were two others who were apparently coming with her. The two men seemed to be traveling companions and had the soiled look of experience. She felt better about the tour she had booked, seeing that these two were going with the same firm. She was sure they had done this before. Each had dressed as if they knew what to expect, with a long-sleeved shirt and full pants—inner shirt tucked in, outer shirt left out—and ankle boots with corded laces pulled out of harms reach: the sign of experienced, thoughtful, well-worn travelers. They sat near her, in the section of the lobby that had been designated by the concierge as the waiting area for this particular tour company.

“You’ve not been on one of the tours before, eh?” The younger of the two addressed her, leaning a bit forward, though still far enough away in his leather chair not to appear to be entering a conspiracy. His shoulders dipped forward over his knees and his hands sought each other’s company.

“Why, no. Does it show so well?” She would explore with these two men for a day and a half, perhaps two. Both appeared serviceably assembled, without extraneous parts. To be touring with them was not so bad a prospect, if they could get along from the start.

“Not so much. You seem almost prepared, but did you bring any other shoes?” He pointed down at her running shoes.

She thought canvas would perform best for the heat, and the soles were thick enough for most stubble. The toe curled up a little and would balance her forward. She had assumed there would be some walking. The road would surely come up to the edge of the village, but the more commercial cases would overtake the road frontage, the stronger bodies jostling out the weaker ones, and to see what she wanted to see, she would have to walk into the place, wind her way past the sham and show to get into the real muck and malaise. To reach the real wreckage, she would have to muscle past the window dressing.

“I’m thinking I can make good time with these. I took them out for half a dozen running sessions on the track back home to make sure they were broken in.” She slipped her foot onto the side, so the tread could be seen by the concerned fellow tourist.

“Yes, but you might find more to do in these villages than stay light on your feet.” He leaned back, resettling his shoulders, making himself look wider. “I knocked down a fence post last trip, straight on, and I’m glad I had a set of hard-toed shoes. These places look ramshackle, but you would be surprised how hard sticks, thatch, animal hide, and bone can be. Henry there had to put a heel on some blighter’s forehead just to get past him to see where a kid had drowned in the village latrine. They might look spindly, but anyone’s skull can ring right through a flimsy set of shoes.”

Henry smiled and brought his size eleven footwear from flat on the floor up onto the balls of his feet, the new boots solid stem to stern and the laces tucked out of the way. He had an oddly alluring shock of blonde hair that fell playfully out from his ball cap and made just the hint of a question mark on his brow.

Yes, these two could be good touring companions.

She glanced a minute at each of her shoes, rolling them side to side. “Well, don’t let the bus leave without me. I’ll pop around to my room and see if I’ve got something a bit more durable.” She did have those ankle boots. They had a bit of a short heel and might get uncomfortable, but were solid enough. And

they might make for a better look if she was to spend time with these two emergently interesting, unencumbered men.

She pushed herself out of the deep leather chair, the cushion slowly rising back into place, silently reclaiming its air. “Remember, hold the bus. I don’t want to have to hunt you down,” she said as she turned, gliding to the elevator. She let her head loll slowly over her shoulder, turning more slowly than her body, a slight seductive tension drawn across her midsection. She was hoping the two new companions were watching the sizzle of her fishhook sway as she exaggerated it, just barely, while she wound away, towards the polished gleam of the unopened lift door. After the tour, they would all be in a rush of self-satisfaction, and just the thing to finish off the experience electrically might be for one of them, fresh from the exult of poverty and ruin and bones and disease, to knock on her room door with the bravura of someone who has means. Or perhaps both of them: each knocking separately on the door in thrilling stereo, drilling in time with one hand while griping hard by the neck a negotiated bottle of champagne with the other. Two hands or four, then six, and three glasses for two bottles. The bed was king-sized, after all.

Ken Poyner has lately been seen in *Analog*, *Café Irreal*, *Cream City Review*, *The Journal of Microliterature*, *Blue Collar Review*, and many wonderful places. His latest book of short fiction, *Constant Animals*, is available from his web, www.kpoyner.com, and from www.amazon.com. He is married to Karen Poyner, one of the world's premier power lifters, and holder of more than a dozen current world power lifting records. They are the parents of four rescue cats, and an energetic fish.