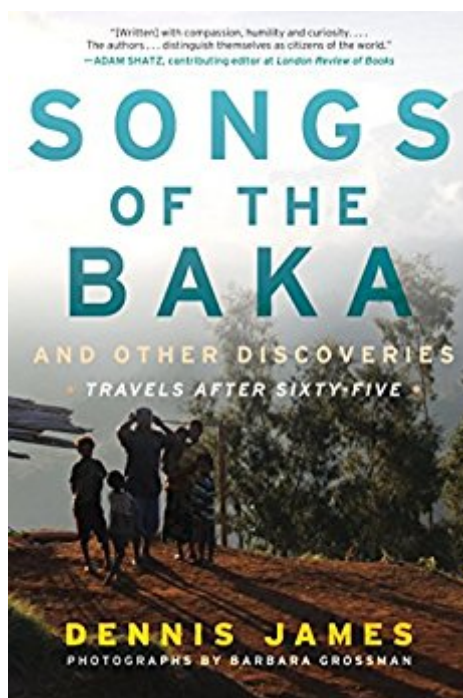


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# Songs Of The Baka And Other Discoveries: Travels After Sixty-Five



## Synopsis

Abandoning the comfort and security of a typical retirement, a couple travels and treks through the most isolated parts of the world. After their retirement, Dennis James and Barbara Grossman decide to travel where tour buses won't and where the US government says "don't," incorporating trekking into their travels as a way to see untouched areas of the world considered inhospitable by many. Armed with a passport, an interest in non-Western and indigenous cultures, a spirit for adventure, and a sense of humor, they hike through the forests in the highlands of Papua New Guinea; visit the traditional hunter-gatherer Baka Pygmy community in Cameroon; stay with the cliff-dwelling Dogon people in Mali; explore Roman ruins in Algeria; meet a nervous mother rhino in Nepal; and witness bull-jumping, a coming-of-age ritual for young Hamar men in Ethiopia. In defiance of typical tourist travel, ignoring State Department warnings, and with a curiosity and hardiness that belies their ages, Dennis and Barbara choose to travel the roads not taken so frequently—to places like Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, and Gaza—seeking the truth behind the headlines and exploring the deeper questions about the local cultures they encounter. Why do these people cling to the art, sexual mores, economic and political hierarchies, and spiritualities that govern their lives? And how and why do they remain resistant to the pressures of globalization? A journey into the other sides of the world, *Songs of the Baka and Other Discoveries* puts aside preconceptions and combines the wisdom of age with the stamina of youth.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

And so we travel on. Dennis James and Barbara Grossman are retired lawyers. Both are over the age of 65. Both have lead lifestyles whereby they are still relatively (and absolutely) fit, though he has had some heart surgery. He is six years older than she. Of the various criteria for picking a partner, age differentials are not the top one. Biologically, it makes more sense if she was six years older than he, to place them "statistically" on a more even footing. Mentally, they seem to be on that even footing, "soulmates," deciding, in retirement, not to "go fishin'™," or off to the country club to chase a white ball on manicured turf, followed by chasing a few drinks on the 19th. Rather, they know it is a very big world, and they want to squeeze additional life experiences out of the still allocated time available. And, at least a few "bravos" for that. This work is an account of their travels, during the last eight years or so, to ten countries, many of which are on the American State Department's list of countries that one is advised not to go to, or, at least, use "extreme caution." The countries are: Papua New Guinea, Algeria, Nepal, Cameroon, Cuba, Mali, Iran, Venezuela, Palestine, and Ethiopia. I've only been to two of the ten, and would love to see the other eight. Therefore, I found their insights most enlightening. Save for the State of Palestine, as they refer to it, properly in my opinion, they do not travel in a tour with others; however, they do always have pre-arranged guides to meet them. I learned a lot, and that is one of my main criteria for evaluating books. Starting with: it really is quite possible to visit some of the "iffy" countries on this list, in terms of personal safety, starting with Algeria, but also including Mali, Venezuela, Palestine and the part of Ethiopia that they ventured into, the southern part, along the border with Kenya. In more trodden countries, such as Nepal, they arranged to take treks less traveled. Globalization, iPhones, basic employment are reoccurring themes. In at least four countries, they arrange to visit people who live much the same as their ancestors did 3,000 years ago, in Venezuela, Ethiopia, Papua New Guinea and the Cameroons. In the latter, they visit the Baka, the more proper name for what were once called "Pygmies." James says that the Baka "are among the world's last hunters and gatherers." I have a profound ambivalence towards such visits, as though

these people are on a display in a zoo. Does the cash from such a visit help or hurt? Should their way of life be preserved, so that the women continue to wash the loin-clothes by pounding stones against them in a stream, or should they obtain washing machines and in the process, add to global warming? James keys in on the true criteria: Are they happy? If so, what do they know that we don't? Face-to-face communications with people directly involved in these situations provides valuable insight not available in our mass media. He provides one such valuable insight from Papua New Guinea, where they are trekking in the sweat and the mud, clinging to a cliff face instead of sipping Pernod at Les Deux Magots café on the Boulevard Saint Germaine. He asks James, his guide, what he thinks of the Christian missionaries who have overrun their country: To my surprise, he loses a tirade against organized religion of any sort. James is Christian, but he has no use for the churches that are corrupt, hypocritical, and full of jealousy and inner power struggles. On the other hand: He acknowledges one significant achievement of the Christian ascendancy: It kept us from killing one another. The subject quip was made in Mali, where they elected to take a chance in an admittedly effy area, referring to how many 19-year old's think they are bullet-proof. For sure, James and Grossman don't think that way, and relate some caution, and just a few aches and pains along the way. Is Algeria really any more effy than surviving the seemingly daily killings here in Albuquerque, New Mexico? The best news in the book was saved for the end. James is now 79, and he indicates the NEXT destination: Angola. Clearly a couple who have decided it might be best to go out with one's boots on rather than drooling into an emesis basin in a nursing home (or the one the country club provides!). Having become a lawyer (of sorts) rather late in life, I too am ready to retire, and join them on those many under the radar destinations that are still ever-so available. 5-stars, plus, for their account.

Reading this book is a treat! Dennis James, the author, and the photographer, his wife Barbara Grossman, are just the sort of people you'd like to travel with. They start with their trip to Papua New Guinea, where the best modes of transportation are your own two feet or small airplanes, and the islands as viewed from the sky reveal dramatic mountain ranges. Dennis and Barbara take us along on their travels to Algeria, Nepal, Cameroon, Cuba, Mali, Iran, Venezuela and the State of Palestine. On each trip, they seek out and introduce us to wonderful people: we meet in Ethiopia a Rastafarian from the Caribbean who makes collages using material from banana

plants! Dennis and Barbara make you feel like you are on first name basis. They are welcoming, interesting and able to share their love for life. Their wisdom and experience provide insights that a casual observer might miss. I highly recommend this book.

A great read! I don't know how these two travelers have the courage to visit these remote, challenging, yet most fascinating destinations. It was exciting and most enjoyable vicariously accompanying them on their adventures. This book is informative and well written. The authors provided a wide-angle lens for viewing the destinations and the issues relevant to these places.

I recommended the chapter on Cuba to a graduate student who is doing research on education there. The chapter on Cameroon that gives the book its title is fascinating. Dennis James has a wonderful eye for a telling detail.

A great read for anyone thinking of adventurous travel or for anyone who would never dare!

Vicarious travel is always a pleasure, but this is outstanding. I do so appreciate the author and his camera happy wife for sharing their experiences. Having made some pilgrimages, I can appreciate the uniqueness of theirs, and say again how much insight they are able to convey. I enjoyed every word, and wish them more edifying journeys.

Very much enjoying these unique stories from two great story-tellers.

This is a book that praises 3rd world countries while denigrating the achievements of the U.S. The author swoons over poor, violent and backward countries. However, he and his wife have benefited from living in a capitalist country where he received an education and was able to support himself and his children. He and his family live in a safe country where they can worship as they please and explore the arts. I found his positive comments about Iran and the Palestinians delusional. These countries murder innocent people. Did the author ever consider that he can visit any country he wants (with a personal tour), yet citizens of these 3rd world countries will never be able to afford to visit our country.

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