

TRAVELING THE WORLD

By JoAnn Morgan

Whether it is a highly developed country like Australia or a third world emerging democracy like Bhutan, a NASA visitor is welcome. So says JoAnn Morgan, who is spending much of her retirement as a world traveler learning about new cultures, new places, new creatures. From Sydney Harbor to the high Himalayas, from wombat to red panda, from cardamom to teak forests, she is drinking in the variety of our planet. In her own words we can travel along:

“For many years before I retired in 2003 I thought of visiting all 50 states in our great country, traveling to all 7 continents (well, maybe not Antarctica at first), seeing cultures totally different from ours, tackling the dramatic geography and earth features like the Himalayas, Tasmania Island, Mount Fuji, Ayers Rock, and many others, and getting some insight into whether people of other lands knew and cared about NASA going to the moon, knew of our discoveries like the great space observatories (Hubble, others), the feats, disasters, and recoveries of the Space Shuttle and International Space Station, the plucky Mars Rovers, etc.

So, I have spent a good bit of the last five years exploring our country and our planet. I guess I am just a very curious woman. “I planned two months of travel abroad every year, with five months in Montana and the great northwest - including Canada, another five months each year in Florida and the eastern USA. I now have traveled four times across the US by motor vehicle including one trip in a large Penske truck when we took furniture to the Montana house. These trips gave me a great appreciation for all the states I used to fly over en route to work at JPL, Ames, Dryden, White Sands and JSC, or to contractor sites in Utah, Denver, and St. Louis.

“Now I just fly over them again. Four driving trips is enough. But this did facilitate my visit to all but one state west of the Mississippi (still haven't been to Oregon). I also haven't yet been to Hawaii, Maine, or Rhode Island. Trips abroad have taken me to ten countries on four continents: Asia (Japan, India, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand); Europe (England); North America (Canada and Mexico); and Australia.

“I have been to Australia three times - it is impossible to see enough in a month-long trip, so I have been to different sections of the country each time and have enjoyed the people and the scenery, especially the wildlife, and the unusual geography, plants and trees. Also I find the Australian people so friendly and happy to see Americans (despite their dislike of our former President George Bush), and they love the space program and are very knowledgeable about our achievements and goals. In April/May 2008, I visited the tracking site near Perth and the Ayers Rock Observatory in the Australian Northern Territory.

“Engineers and astrophysicists were delighted to see me and enthusiastically described their favorite NASA programs. The astronomers at Ayers Rock kept me out until 3 a.m. one night looking at the southern sky to see stars, views of planets and constellations I never see here in Florida. The Milky Way was the brightest and most

dramatic in the dark desert sky, as was the Southern Cross. In fact the night sky there was so crowded with stars it made me wonder where all our northern hemisphere stars were. We no longer can see them due to light pollution here. I do get to see some beautiful night sky in Montana and nearby Canada, and in particular enjoy the meteor showers every summer and the aurora . Also, I can see as many as six satellites crossing in the night sky most nights.”

I visited eastern India in 2006. I had to go to Calcutta and Darjeeling to enable travel overland into the Himalayas to Bhutan, the last Buddhist monarchy. This was the adventure of a lifetime. Four landslides slowed the journey from Darjeeling into the high Himalayas ,the train from there caught fire with us aboard. and we had to go on a tiny bus through the mountain passes on roads built by hand labor. When the bus came to a landslide, we either waited until it was cleared or climbed over it and walked to the next village (often 2- 4 miles away, up or down a mountainside).

During those walks I saw water buffalo,elephants, monkeys, black eagles, red pandas, tiny barking deer and other incredible wildlife. Many villages had no utilities but usually there was a generator at night for two hours or so. No driving at all at night. Accommodations were definitely not 5-star, more like minus 5-star. I had one meal in a yak herders' yurt and was obliged to eat yak fat as he honored me with a big chunk of it in my little bowl of soup. , Thankfully, many of the meals were vegetarian as we made our way through the edge of Nepal. stopping at the refugee center where the government of India cares for thousands of refugees from Chinese oppression in Nepal and Tibet.

The refugees have nothing and many are children and women. They are living by the rivers , on rocks and in valleys with little housing or facilities Four doctors on the bus did triage at a tented medical clinic and others of us on the bus helped school teachers from India setting up a school for the children. We gave away nearly all the paper, pencils and books we had to the school . Once you saw the poverty in India , there was no complaining . Over 30 % of the children are malnourished and in Calcutta it appears that nearly everyone over age 40 has some sort of respiratory disease . I did not encounter anyone else from the USA but our small cadre of Stanford graduates.

Stanford had helped organize the trip into Bhutan which is a Himalayan jewel. There were no beggars in Bhutan like we saw in India . The people farm and feed themselves. Rice farms in the valleys and up mountainsides were beautiful, worked by hand and with water buffalo . In the villages, We saw small plots of vegetables, potatoes, orange trees, papayas and other tropical fruit growing - but in small numbers. One farmer proudly showed me his orange grove - three trees! But we never were in a town of even a few thousand population.

This country knew about our space program though. Even though they have only had schools for 25 years and as late as the 1980's a quota of only 300 people were allowed to enter the country each year. Yet, everyone saw Sputnik, Explorer I, Apollo 11 and our global space history in Bhutanese stamps. Bhutan was one of the first countries to issue a space theme stamp and they are beautiful . Many are quite big. Also their ancient history believes in space travel and one of their most famous temples

features paintings of the solar system and paintings of a fantasy of the first human beings coming from space to land in the Himalayas and populate the earth.

The people, despite their remote location and 12th century lifestyle, have incorporated a space-faring people into their belief system and have knowledge of space exploration. Only the young people can read, as you can imagine, since schools have not existed there very long. The king and queen of Bhutan sent their daughter to Stanford University where she was a classmate of Chelsea Clinton, and, the Queen upon hearing Stanford grads were in the capital, arranged for our small group to stay in the royal guesthouse. This was quite a treat and despite the red wool carpets being moth eaten around the edges, the beautiful traditional wood carving and hand crafted building was lovely, spacious and with art covering the ceilings and most of the walls.

The Queen met us at a reception and I had a lovely chat with her when she told me she had met the "Queen of New York" at her daughter's graduation a few years ago. She meant, of course, Hillary Clinton. She was delighted to hear that during my visit to an elementary school that day, a fifth grade girl told me she wanted to be an astronaut. Little did I expect that as I chased my dream of traveling the world that I would meet a child in the Himalayas who wanted to be an astronaut or have an evening with the Queen of the country.

My 41 years of work at NASA over a 45 year career at the Cape still gives me a lot to talk about, no matter where I go in the world and I can see firsthand how our space exploration touches people. At 4 continents, 10 countries, 46 states visited, I am just getting started.