



## The Joy Of Skiing!

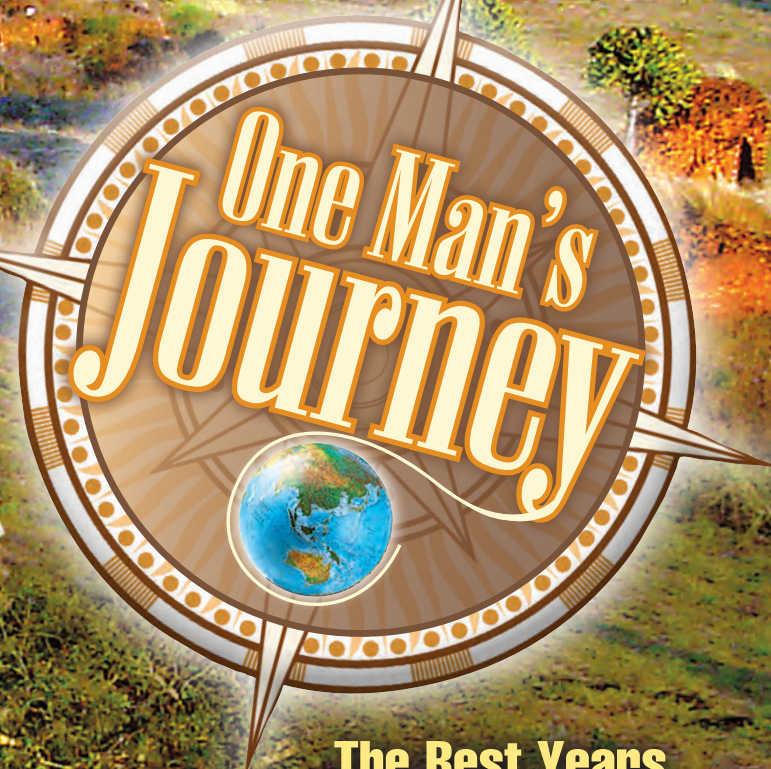
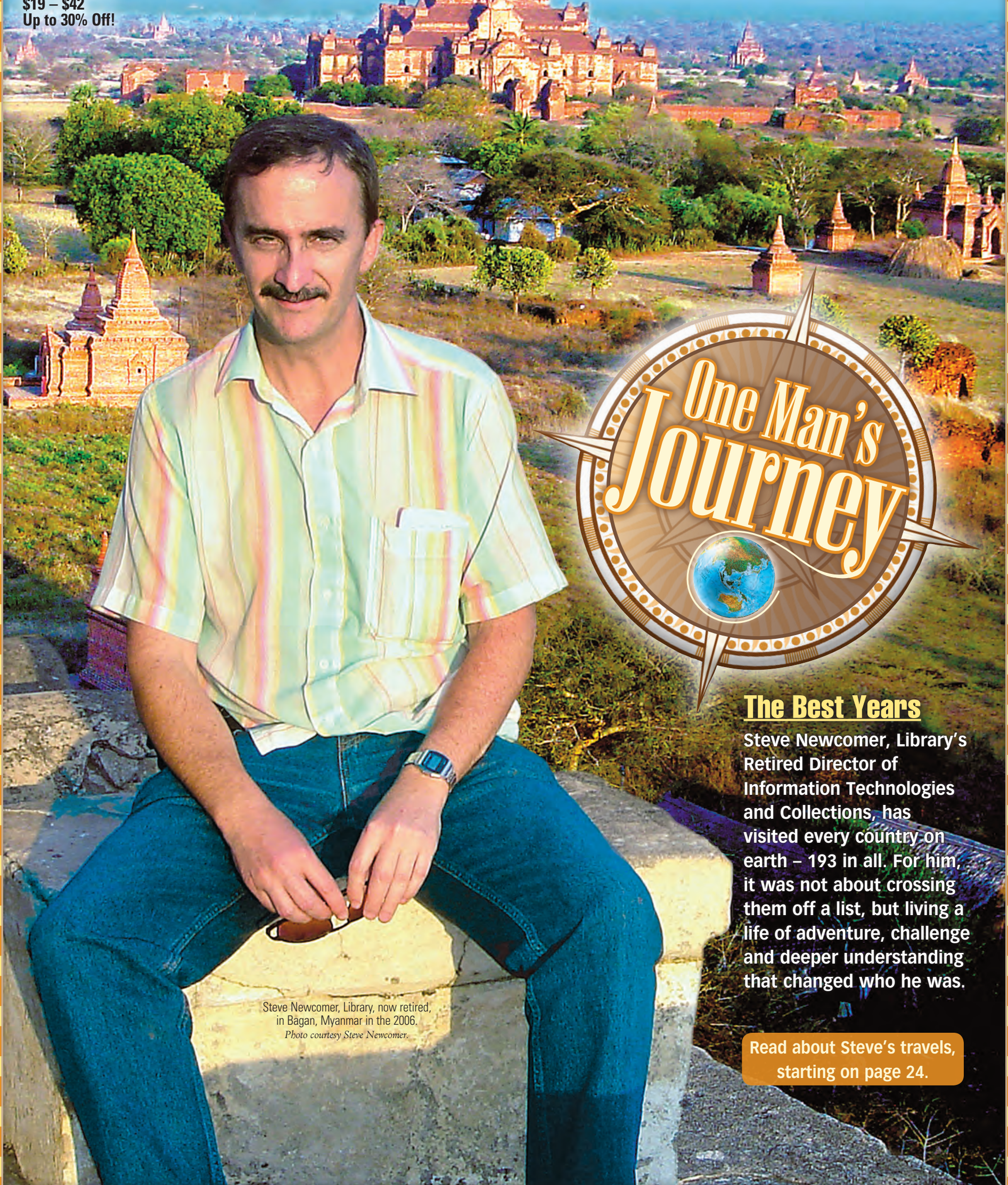
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Page 45

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# Alive!



### The Best Years

Steve Newcomer, Library's Retired Director of Information Technologies and Collections, has visited every country on earth – 193 in all. For him, it was not about crossing them off a list, but living a life of adventure, challenge and deeper understanding that changed who he was.

Read about Steve's travels, starting on page 24.

Steve Newcomer, Library, now retired, in Bagan, Myanmar in the 2006.  
Photo courtesy Steve Newcomer.



City Employees Club of Los Angeles  
120 West 2nd Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Club Valentine!




See page 8

A Huge Valentines Section!



**ALIVE! FEATURE**



**The Best Years**

# One Man's Journey

**Steve Newcomer, Retired, Library, has visited every country on earth – 193 in all. But the longest journey was the one inside of him.**

*Photos by Summy Lam, Club Director of Marketing, and courtesy Steve Newcomer*

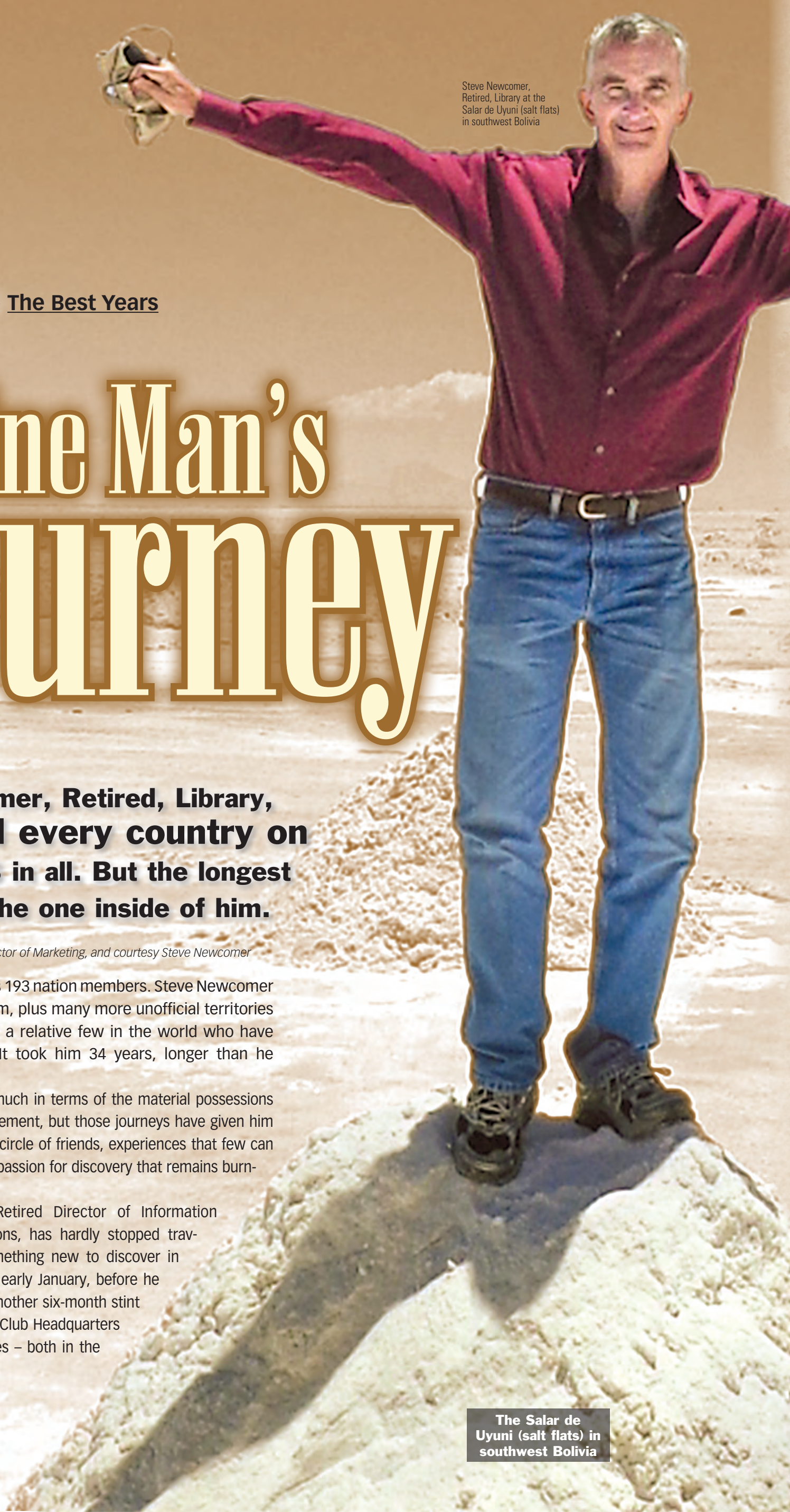
The United Nations lists 193 nation members. Steve Newcomer has been to all of them, plus many more unofficial territories and regions. He's one of a relative few in the world who have accomplished the feat. It took him 34 years, longer than he worked for the City.

His journeys cost him much in terms of the material possessions he doesn't have in his retirement, but those journeys have given him much more – a worldwide circle of friends, experiences that few can list on their résumé, and a passion for discovery that remains burning to this day.

Steve, the Library's Retired Director of Information Technologies and Collections, has hardly stopped traveling. There is always something new to discover in the world, he says, and in early January, before he returned to LAX to begin another six-month stint abroad, he stopped by the Club Headquarters to talk about his discoveries – both in the world, and inside himself.

Steve Newcomer, Retired, Library at the Salar de Uyuni (salt flats) in southwest Bolivia

The Salar de Uyuni (salt flats) in southwest Bolivia





# Beyond the Comfort Zone

[ The *Alive!* Interview ]

On Jan. 8, Steve Newcomer, Retired Director of Information Technologies and Collections, Library, stopped by the Club's administrative headquarters to chat about his travels, what he's learned, and making the sacrifices necessary to live a life of discovery. He was interviewed by John Hawkins, Club CEO.

**Steve, thanks for joining us today before you head out again. Let's talk very briefly about your city employment.**

STEVE: Sure. I started at the City as a Catalog Librarian in 1989 and worked my way to being the Director of Information Technologies and Collections.

**And you had a career before that.**

STEVE: I was always a restless kind of a person. In fact, I was surprised I ever stuck it out at the Library for 24 years, but I finally found what I enjoyed doing. I'd worked as a librarian previously. I worked bagging groceries in a grocery store. I worked for a peace group in Washington, D.C., a lobby group. I did social service and church work in Puerto Rico. I taught English in Brazil. I worked in refugee camps in Honduras on the Honduras/El Salvador border during the war. And I worked a year for American Airlines.

**Got it. You mentioned a lot of really great things in your essay. I don't want to duplicate all of that, but I would imagine it's going to be impossible to name your favorite country you've been to. But maybe the two or three or five favorite countries, of the 193 you've visited?**

STEVE: The things that come to mind are some of the encounters I've had, whether it be people or wildlife. Even though Antarctica isn't a country, it's one of the most spectacular places on earth and one that is at the top of my list of a place I'd like to go back to. It has stark beauty, the ice, the mountains, the sea, the penguins. It's just a memorable journey that anyone would appreciate for a lifetime, so even though it's not a country it's still on my list of favorite places.

Brazil... having lived there, I have friends, and I find the country so warm, accepting, sensual. It's a beautiful country as well. It's got everything from magnificent waterfalls and the Amazon River and the beauty of the mountains around Guanabara Bay and Rio. It's spectacular country. Rwanda, my gosh. Talk about an interesting place. Central Africa. The mountain gorillas, an experience you will never, ever forget. Hiking in the mountains and coming close to the gorillas is just awesome. I went back three times just to visit those gorillas. It was just that exciting for me.

Yemen... Yemen is a place that most people would steer clear of because of the instability and some of the unpleasant terrorist activity going on, but it's a country full of cultural fascination. The tribes. The sand dunes. The ancient cities. Fascinating place. Certainly in the top five for me.

**You**

**must have been in the middle of some wars and contentious situations.**

STEVE: A few times, yes. Somalia was a trip that was made totally by accident. I was on a plane that landed in Mogadishu, and we were detained there for a few days totally unplanned. There were some dicey moments there with a warlord and gun-toting youth. I went back to Iraq a couple of years ago now. It was much calmer at that time, but certainly there were bomb blasts going off in and around places when I was there. But you take risks wherever you go. You could be struck by a car walking across the street, so while that's always a consideration for me it's never stopped me from going someplace.

## Starting Early

**Why do you travel? What is that thing that makes you want to explore the world?**

STEVE: I think it's genetic, I tell you. My father also liked to travel, although it was very limited at that time just to the few states where he had lived, but perhaps his interest in traveling and seeing scenery and meeting people rubbed off on me in some way.

It's plain and simple curiosity, and I've had that since I was a little kid. I've always wanted to know what was around the corner.

**Have you traveled since you were young?**

STEVE: As a kid we would take trips around the states, you know, whether it be up to the mountains or to New Mexico or

greater degree of independence in the near future like Kosovo. It's not a U.N. country but at some point could certainly become one.

**So then did you go to Yugoslavia?**

STEVE: I went to Yugoslavia when it was a united country, and I've been back since all of the separate nations split off, yes.

**So the number 193 – does that take into account the political changes that have happened since you started?**

STEVE: Right, and it also depends what you call a country. The United Nations has a very defined list and it's easy to go by, but there are many other dependencies and semi-autonomous regions and island groups around the world that are not fully independent, but they act in many ways as independent nations, at least to some degree.

**Like Samoa.**

STEVE: Yes, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, Bermuda.

**Any idea what that real number would be, then, according to your own definition, not the United Nations definition but your own?**

STEVE: There are travel groups and clubs out there that like to define these things, and I've always steered clear of having a strong opinion on that, but a local travel group, the Travelers' Century Club, has a board of directors that defines these things. They say there are 324 such countries, including semi-autonomous regions of the world. So I think that's as good of a number as any to use if you want to start expanding beyond the 193 U.N. countries.

## Food and Other Adventures

**Do you have a set of rules that you go by to stay healthy and not get sick?**

STEVE: Cipro, number one. You shouldn't travel anywhere without Cipro. Cipro is a great medicine to kill anything that might end up in your stomach and disorient you. I don't go anywhere without Cipro. It's a prescription drug.

**Any other tips for taking care of yourself?**

STEVE: I'm very careful about eating. I steer clear of anything that's hasn't been cooked or which I can't peel myself. It's simple rules like that.

**Bottled water?**

STEVE: Bottled water obviously, yes.

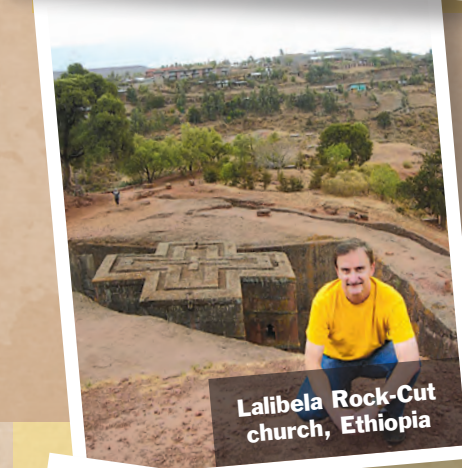
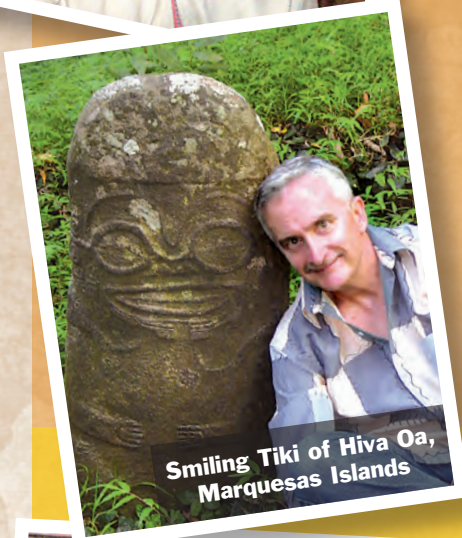
**What are some memories of the things that you have experienced in terms of eating?**

STEVE: It might offend a lot of people, but I've eaten dog. I have eaten camel and monkey and worms; those are some of the things that come to mind. I didn't enjoy them all necessarily, but when you're in a circumstance where that's served to you very proudly by a host family...

**You don't have a choice.**

STEVE: You really want to at least give it a try.

**A lot of people can say, "Oh, you know, I went to another**



back to see family in Indiana. Those kinds of trips we would take every summer but nothing very extensive until I was in college, and then I started branching out and taking some study abroad classes in the Middle East and Dominican Republic.

**Your very first trip out of the country was to where?**

STEVE: When I was a kid, my folks took us to Canada and Mexico, but I don't really count that. The first trip I took basically on my own was as a senior in college when I went to the Middle East for a class, but I took off a month before the class to go across Europe and Egypt and Jordan. That's when I really consider my trips began, the 34 years when I visited all the countries of the world.

**And your final visit, to complete the 193, was South Sudan, is that correct?**

STEVE: Right, South Sudan is the newest country on earth. It just became a country in July 2011. As soon as it became independent I had to go there, of course, so in November 2011 I flew there and took a two-week safari with some other people to one of the national parks.

**Are there any other territories that are on the verge of becoming a nation?**

STEVE: There are some that are semi-independent now that may achieve some



**ALIVE! FEATURE**

**The *Alive!* Interview**

— CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25



**Nosi Be, Madagascar**



**Lesotho**



**Stone Money, Yap, Micronesia**



**Sveti Stefan, Montenegro**



**Chernobyl Reactor, Ukraine**



front of me. The fewer distractions I have, the less luggage I carry, the less burdened I am with those material things, the more I'm forced to interact with people around me. So that's also a lesson I've learned.

**The Inward Journey**

**How has this changed you?**

STEVE: It's made me appreciate that very few issues are black and white in this world. There's a lot of gray, and it's made me appreciate other people's perspectives on things much more. There's always another side to just about every story you can come up with.

**The world is more complicated than people want to admit.**

STEVE: Yes, people want things to be very easily right or wrong, black or white, and it's just very seldom that way.

**'I'm convinced I was born with a "wanderlust" gene.'**

— Steve Newcomer, Retired, Library

country," and they tick that off and check that box. But it seems to me like that was never really your motivation.

STEVE: No.

**It wasn't like checking boxes. It was more about adventure and discovery.**

STEVE: That's right, and I had never dreamed or imagined that I could visit all of the countries in my lifetime. It was really never the goal. The goal was, as you said, adventure, curiosity, meeting new people, seeing the scenery and sights that I've read about in *National Geographic* since I was a kid. That's what it was about. But the more countries I gradually visited the more possible it seemed that I could reach that

goal of visiting them all, and so I eventually did. But yes, you're right. It was not about checking off boxes. There are a lot of people who do this, but what sets some of us apart from others is that we like to spend some time in the countries we're visiting.

**Not just touch down in the airport.**

STEVE: Right. So for me, wherever it's been possible, I've spent at least a few days in the country.

**And this hasn't stopped you from traveling even more.**

STEVE: Oh no, because there's no end to it. You have countries like China and Russia and India out there that are vast expanses, and it takes many visits to see the whole place.

**You're leaving again for China next week.**

STEVE: I'm going to China. China is a vast country, so I am going back to some of the provinces I haven't visited prior, and taking the bus through Laos as well and see what happens. I'll be gone about six months.

**The more you go the more you realize what you're missing.**

STEVE: That's exactly right. You end up going somewhere and someone locally tells you, "Oh, you really have to go over there to see..." And you never knew about that place, so it'll never end.

**Do you speak any other languages?**

STEVE: I speak Portuguese and Spanish, yes. And bits and pieces, a few words here in there in a variety of languages to get by.

**Have you found English is pretty much universal?**

STEVE: Oh yes. English is the best language to know in most parts of the world. French is a good second, though.

**Has the world changed since you started?**

STEVE: You bring up a good point. You can go very few places where someone doesn't have a cell phone in their hand. Even in the middle of Africa people have their cell phones or in most cases now smartphones. But that's another thing: Even though I was the director of I.T. for the Los Angeles Public Library, I'm a minimalist when it comes to technology, and most people are surprised by that. I don't own a smartphone, and I don't want to travel with electronic gadgetry. When I travel I want to leave that behind because I find that it distracts me from interacting with the culture in which I find myself. So when I travel I don't care if it's for a week or for six months, I only bring what can go in a small backpack that can fit underneath the airline seat in

**You talked in your essay about preconceived notions. What preconceived notions that you had when you started this 34 years ago did you dispel, are gone from you now, or that you have rethought?**

STEVE: Oh boy, that's a loaded question. It's a lot of preconceived ideas that I certainly grew up with as a kid in the Midwest that you learn aren't always the case, like kids everywhere have equal opportunity to education, or have food. It's just not true. There are people today who are literally starving in parts of the world, and kids don't have access to education the world over. People don't have access to clean drinking water. Governments are not always taking good care of their people. Religion has its dark and evil side as well as its good and charitable side. So yes, a lot of things that I as a kid grew up believing and thinking were challenged, as is the case when any of us venture out beyond our comfort zones. Here in L.A. we could have similar experiences.

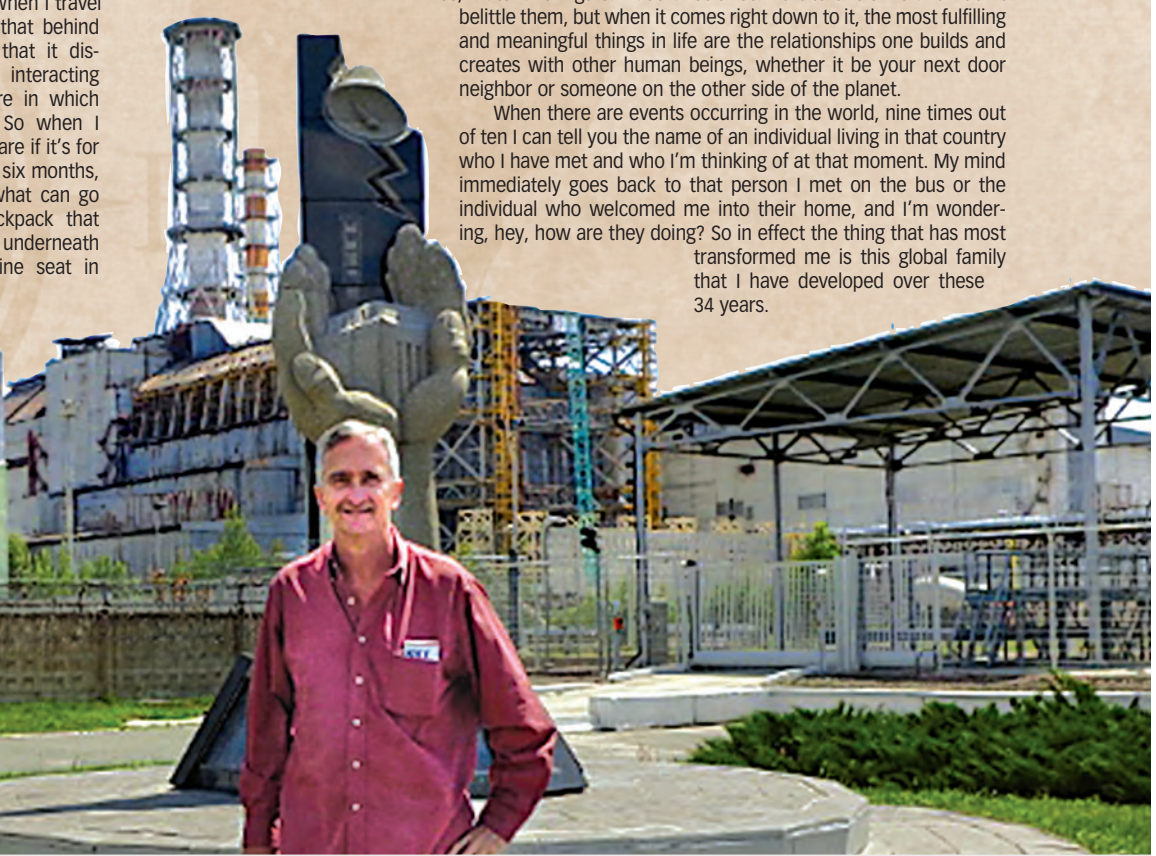
**What have you learned?**

STEVE: One of the most important lessons I've learned is to be a bit more environmentally conscious. Good ol' Planet Earth is in peril - forests are being eliminated, wildlife habitat destroyed... there's pollution, fish shortages, overpopulation, displacement of peoples, *et cetera*. So I try to give back by assisting local environmental and development groups in some countries, whether it's planting trees or helping farmers buy seeds or dig wells or buy supplies for a school or clinic. I try to do a little bit to ensure that the next generation will inherit a livable planet.

**Let's talk about some moments. Do you remember any moments that really either changed you or really touched you that remain with you now?**

STEVE: There have been so many, John. In general terms it's been times when those chance encounters with people on a public bus in Guyana or going across the hills of Burkina Faso and local people strike up conversations with you. And one of them will invite you into their home and you end up spending the night or another night, and you're experiencing life as that local family lives it. Those are the special moments for me because you realize that people are very loving and accepting and welcoming, even when they may not have much to offer you, and it touches you. It reminds me that the most important things in life are not necessarily the material things. Yes, material things can add a lot of comfort to one's life and I don't belittle them, but when it comes right down to it, the most fulfilling and meaningful things in life are the relationships one builds and creates with other human beings, whether it be your next door neighbor or someone on the other side of the planet.

When there are events occurring in the world, nine times out of ten I can tell you the name of an individual living in that country who I have met and who I'm thinking of at that moment. My mind immediately goes back to that person I met on the bus or the individual who welcomed me into their home, and I'm wondering, hey, how are they doing? So in effect the thing that has most transformed me is this global family that I have developed over these 34 years.





**Do you find your worldview is different than most people's? Are you a little counter-cultural?**

STEVE: My worldview is such that when something happens I'm thinking of an individual. I can tell you the name of someone who might be impacted by whatever is going on in the world, whether it be political or economic or geologic. The only thing I can say is my worldview is more personalized maybe than a lot of people because I can put a name to the place, and that impacts how I view events.

**Sacrifice**

**Many people will be reading this and saying, "This is an amazing story, and it sounds like I would like to do it myself," or something like that. But this has come at some significant cost to you.**

STEVE: Oh yes. I'm certainly not a wealthy person by any stretch of the imagination. I was a Librarian for the City for 24 years. It's like any passion in life: If you're truly passionate about something you'll find a way to do it, and for me it meant living without a car, living in a small studio apartment, doing without a lot of the electronic gadgets that people like to have, living as simply as I can at home so that I can follow my passion to visit places around the world.

**What steps would you recommend people take even to have a small taste of what you've done to alter their travel to the kinds of places they go? What's your advice to people who want to at least taste a little bit of what you know?**

STEVE: Everybody is different. The one thing I've learned is that what I may find fun and attractive and appealing is the last thing anybody else would want to do. But I'd say find something that sparks some interest in you and talk to somebody who's been there and who can give you advice on how to get there and what to do and where to stay once you're there. Just dip your toe in the water and get a taste for it and see how it goes.

**How did you meet real people in each country, when most of the tourism industry seems to me to kind of give you an experience that you pay for but you don't necessarily connect into the way real people live in each country. What advice can you give to the Club Members who are reading this to find a way to meet a real person in a real country rather than sort of the typical travel or tourist experiences that they would have had?**

STEVE: Avoid the group tours. Go on your own. I mean in some places you cannot do that, but the way I've met people and been immersed in these cultures is by going on my own, taking the local transportation, getting on the local bus or train to go somewhere, walking in the streets looking for a hotel to stay in. In these prepackaged tours everything's arranged for you, so many of the opportunities to mingle with local people are very greatly diminished. I have nothing against a prepackaged tour. In some places that's all you can do. North Korea you have to go with a group. The time I went to Libya you had to go with a group. Iraq I had to go with a group.

**Cuba?**

STEVE: To Cuba I had to go with a group, yes.

**How long ago did you go to North Korea? That is like a mystery country.**

STEVE: It's the most unique place on the planet, no doubt about it. I went, I don't know, maybe eight years ago or so. There's no place on earth like North Korea.

**Do you read a lot?**

STEVE: I do, and I think that's why I became a librarian: What does someone with my kind of passion do for a living? My passion developed in part because of my reading. I wanted to learn about all these places on earth, and so I read a lot as a kid. And as a professional librarian you're delving into every imaginable subject every day, helping people with their research needs, so I think that's why I might've become a librarian.

**How have your experiences been with Customs and Immigration Services coming back in? Do they ask you why in the world you are going into these countries?**

STEVE: Yes. In fact, the least pleasant part of any trip I take is coming back into the United States and being invariably grilled by the customs officials. "Why were you there? What were you doing?" You've got people coming through the customs line with boxes and bundles and enormous amounts of baggage and they're just waved right through. I come along with my little backpack that can go underneath an airline seat and I'm forced to go into the line to have it checked. It's because of my travel history. When I came back from Afghanistan I was pulled aside and questioned at length. The armed security guards came out at LAX to the roadside where people drop off passengers and escorted me back into the building to be cross-examined. It's offensive, but it's the price I have to pay.

**You had cleared. You were on your way to your transportation.**

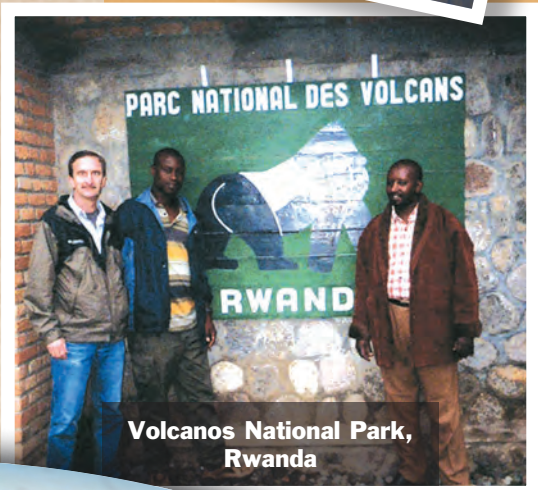
STEVE: I had cleared. I was out to catch the bus and they came out and brought me back in. But I'm not bitter, not at all. I'm still traveling.

**Steve, thank you for this interview, and safe travels.**

STEVE: Sure, you're welcome.



Banc d'Arguin National Park, Mauritania



Volcanos National Park, Rwanda



**IN HIS OWN WORDS:**

**The Rewards of Travel**

**World traveler Steve Newcomer, Library, Retired, reflects on his experiences visiting every nation on earth.**

I'm convinced I was born with a "wanderlust" gene: an innate desire to relentlessly explore every corner of our earth. As a kid I'd arise along with the Colorado daybreak to walk around my small town and catch a glimpse of far off Pike's Peak before anyone else had awakened; I loved poring over maps to help plan our family's summer vacations; and there was a high school social studies report I presented on the United Nations, all the while daydreaming what it would be like to actually visit all those exotic countries and the people who call them home.

There were also college courses in Spanish and German as well as the interterm classes that took me away from campus: a cross-cultural immersion experience in the Dominican Republic and a "Middle East Today" course in Israel and the West Bank. But those were just preludes to greater adventures: a year long volunteer service experience in refugee camps on the Honduras/El Salvador border during their civil war, as well as multi-year stints in both Brazil and Puerto Rico, followed by a brief career with American Airlines, when I spent almost as much time taking free flights around the world as I did in the office.

I soon accepted the fact that I cared much more about peering over the next hill and peeking around the next corner and meeting the next stranger than I did about owning a home or a car or any of the other material things that most of my peers prized. And I slowly began to realize that my goal of world travel was indeed possible, if I were willing to forgo many of the commonly pursued comforts of life.

So, with the blessing of generous bosses at the Los Angeles Public Library who allowed me to creatively cobble together vacation time to pursue my peripatetic exploits, I have managed to find buses, trains, trucks, camels, horses, jeeps, planes with see-through floors, boats that leaked, canoes, and of course, my own two feet, to visit the 193 countries (and a lot of their territories) that make up the United Nations. I've inadvertently met presidents and warlords, eaten every manner of "food" and been bitten by bugs that don't have names; I've been treated royally by an Arabian prince, mugged by knife-wielding thieves; invited to a Ugandan teenage circumcision ceremony; interrogated by U.S. Customs officials; brushed up against by a gorilla; and mobbed by children who had never seen a white person before.

But my wanderings haven't just been about crossing international borders. The 34-year journey has been one of interacting with cultures very different from my own, and of creating my own global "family" – individuals whom I have felt drawn to and those who have helped to mold my understanding of the world. It has been a journey about receiving insights from countless people representing a multitude of languages, faiths, and economic and social conditions; and one of sharing myself and my resources with those far less privileged than me. Whether providing soccer balls for kids in Ethiopia, condoms for health workers in Cuba, materials for a house in Sri Lanka, healthcare for a woman suffering from a heart arrhythmia, tuition for a Guinean refugee, or garden supplies for farmers in Rwanda and Brazil, one of my

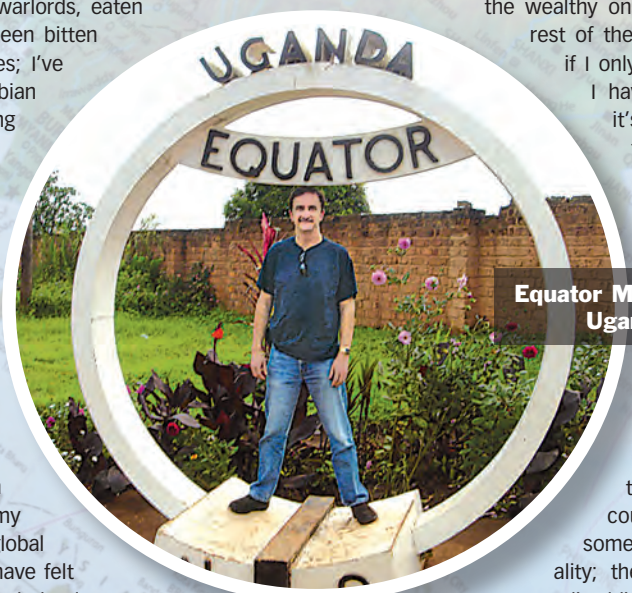
aims has been to assist people to achieve their own goals, while allowing my own biases and beliefs to be challenged. I set aside 10 percent of the cost of each trip to "give back" to people I meet along the way – people who will likely never have the good fortune to travel the world as I have.

Too often I compare myself with other Americans who have so much more than I do, rather than seeing that I am the wealthy one in the eyes of most of the rest of the world, having plenty to offer if I only choose to do so. The lesson I have repeatedly learned is that it's not one's economic status that provides security and fulfillment, but one's embrace of those who are different from oneself.

And the most enduring lessons often come from the most

unexpected corners of our globe: a meeting with a gay Iranian student who, facing the death penalty in his own country, could only dream of someday being open about his sexuality; the encounter with a shoeless Somali soldier who tearfully bid me farewell after I forgave him for roughing me up; and the anti-American Surinamese student who insulted me on a bus but later insisted I spend the night in his home. It is when I allow myself to explore the world beyond my own "comfort zone" that I experience the most meaningful growth.

So to this day, when friends tease me about being nearly 60 and having "nothing to show for it," I remind myself that it's not the "things" that bring me joy, but the "family" that has embraced me in the 193 countries of the world.



Equator Monument, Uganda