

WIN A TRIP WITH NICK KRISTOF "I'M STRONG, AND HAVE NO NEED FOR FIVE-STAR HOTELS OR OTHER LUXURIES." - Casey Parks, grand prize winner FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CASEY PARKS'S ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME REPORTING TRIP TO AFRICA. TimesSelect nytimes.com

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Drumroll, Please

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF Published: May 23, 2006

In March I opened a "win a trip" contest, offering to take a university student with me on a rough reporting trip to a neglected area in Africa.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times Nicholas D. Kristof.

Some 3,800 applications poured in, accompanied by boxes of supplementary materials, ranging from senior theses to nude photos. After weeks of sifting through the applications, I finally have a winner.

She is Casey Parks of Jackson, Miss. — an aspiring journalist who has never traveled abroad. We'll get her a passport and a bunch of vaccinations — ah, the glamour of overseas travel — and start planning our trip.

Casey, who turned 23 on Friday, attended Millsaps College in Jackson and is now a graduate student in journalism at the University of Missouri. She has won a string of awards for her essays and other writing.

In her essay, Casey wrote about growing up poor: "I saw my mother skip meals. I saw my father pawn everything he loved. I saw our cars repossessed. I never saw France or London." (The essays by Casey and a dozen finalists are posted at nytimes.com/winatrip.)

"I so desperately want to leave this country and know more," she wrote. Now she'll have the chance.

We'll most likely start in Equatorial Guinea, bounce over to Cameroon and travel through a jungle with Pygmy villages to end up in the Central African Republic — one of the most neglected countries in the world. We'll visit schools, clinics and aid programs, probably traveling in September for 10 days. Casey will write a blog about it for nytimes.com and will also do a video blog for MTV-U.

But the point of this contest wasn't to give one lucky student the chance to get malaria and hookworms. It's to try to stir up a broader interest in the developing world among young people.

One of our country's basic strategic weaknesses is that Americans don't understand the rest of the world. We got in trouble in Vietnam and again in Iraq partly because we couldn't put ourselves in other people's shoes and appreciate their nationalism.

According to Foreign Policy magazine, 92 percent of U.S. college students don't take a foreign language class. Goucher College in Baltimore bills itself as the first American

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college to require all students to study abroad, and the rest should follow that example.

So for all the rest of you who applied for my contest, see if you can't work out your own trips. Or take a year off before heading to college or into a job. You'll have to pay for your travel, but you can often find "hotels" for \$5 a night per person in countries like India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Morocco, Bolivia and Peru — and in rural areas, people may invite you to stay free in their huts. To get around, you can jump on local buses.

Is it safe? Not entirely, for the developing world has more than its share of pickpockets, drunken soldiers, scorpions, thugs, diseases, parasites and other risks.

Twenty-two years ago, as a backpacking student, I traveled with a vivacious young American woman who, like me, was living in Cairo. She got off my train in northern Sudan; that evening, the truck she had hitched a ride in hit another truck. Maybe if there had been an ambulance or a doctor nearby, she could have been saved. Instead, she bled to death.

So, yes, be aware of the risks, travel with a buddy or two, and carry an international cellphone. But remember that young Aussies, Kiwis and Europeans take such a year of travel all the time — women included — and usually come through not only intact, but also with a much richer understanding of how most of humanity lives.

There are also terrific service options. Mukhtar Mai, the Pakistani anti-rape activist I've often written about, told me she would welcome American volunteers to teach English in the schools she has started. You would have to commit to staying six weeks or more, but would get free housing in her village. You can apply by contacting www.4anaa.org.

Then there's New Light, a terrific anti-trafficking organization in Calcutta. Urmi Basu, who runs it, said she would welcome American volunteers to teach English classes to the children of prostitutes. You would have to stay at least six weeks and budget \$15 a day for food and lodging; for more information go to www.uddami.org/newlight.

In the 21st century, you can't call yourself educated if you don't understand how the other half lives — and you don't get that understanding in a classroom. So do something about your educational shortcomings: fly to Bangkok.

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