

This author is no tourist; travel along on his trips

THE BIRD MAN AND THE LAP DANCER: Close Encounters with Strangers. By Eric Hansen. Pantheon Books. \$24, hardback.

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There is more adventure in one page of Eric Hansen's book than many people will have in a lifetime. His travels aren't short trips or vacations. Nor are they tales from Disney World or Las Vegas. Instead, Hansen lives life in other cultures rather than just visiting for a weekend getaway. He makes connections with people, seeing his travels as not a way to escape everyday life but the only way to live it.

The Bird Man and The Lap Dancer: Close Encounters with Strangers is a collection of travel essays and Hansen's fourth book. He has been traveling and writing for more than 20 years. It is not a work of suspense or adventure as might be found in a novel. Instead we follow Hansen, an everyday guy, from country to country.

But it's not a diary or a dry day account of his life. He brings you into his adventures with clear descriptions of people and places. He writes unashamedly about his joys and fears. Each essay is self contained and in a unique setting.

And the range of situations and places is amazing. In one essay

we're with him on Thursday Island in the Pacific watching a man spitting his flaming dentures off the end of the wharf, as he tried to teach "me how to blow fireballs with a mouthful of kerosene and a burning newspaper." And just a dozen pages later, we are at an airplane crash site in Borneo looking for a man's dead wife's wedding ring.

We learn from him as well. "To season one's destiny with the dust of one's folly, that is the trick," says Henry Miller in the quote Hansen uses to begin his book. In almost every essay, things never go quite according to plan. While on a fish-smuggling expedition in the Maldives, he gets hepatitis. His plan to spend just a few days in Calcutta turns into weeks. But he gets to volunteer at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying and Destitute, an experience that changes his life.

Instead of getting frustrated by and deciding never to travel again, Hansen embraces these challenges. Along with him, we learn patience and understanding. His essays aren't written specifically to convey these ideas. He is never preachy or arrogant about his life experience. For travelers or those who just dream of it, this is the perfect book.

Kristin Conard lives in Manhattan and will attend graduate school in England in the fall.