

* Staying On For The Top World

For travel photographer William Jans, seeing the world through a lens is an essential part of simply seeing the world

By RON FORBES-ROBERTS

All photos by WILLIAM JANS

arts

For William Jans, the joy of travel is derived as much from what goes wrong as what goes right. And that, says the professional photographer and veteran traveller, is something that typical travelogue lectures—like those he attended before taking his first trip to Asia in 1988—are not going to tell you. “The ones I went to would start with, ‘Okay, here’s the Taj Mahal and—boom—here’s the Ganges,’ Jans recalls. “And I’d think, ‘Wait a minute—how did you get there and where did you stay and what did you eat?’ I find the stories of actually getting there are far more fun than landmark pictures.”

This is the slant Jans takes in his own multimedia travel shows,

Trekking in Tibet (showing this Friday night) and *Top of the World* (showing Friday, November 29), both of which chronicle his adventures in Laos, China, India, Tibet and Nepal. In these shows, the Vancouver-based Jans happily bares it all: not only the good, the bad and the ugly, but also the wonderfully absurd. “It’s all really honest,” he admits. “I’m not out there to sell tours, so it’s okay to say, ‘Gee, I had a heck of a time getting from here to there and here’s what the problems were and isn’t it amusing to look back on them now?’ As good fortune would have it, the things I find interesting, my audience finds interesting too.”

As one might guess, Jans’ travel interests have nothing to do with discovering the cheapest four-star hotel in Kathmandu or the best place to buy Calvin Klein in Hong Kong. Rather, he says, “I’m inclined to take risks and throw myself into the thick of things. Even on my first visit to Asia, it was bamboozling but intriguing. But instead of being freaked out I felt more like, ‘Oh, what’s that over there? I want to see that.’” It’s just such a “closer-look” imperative which has led Jans to hang with headhunters in Borneo, be gored and tossed off a cliff by a Tibetan yak, win second place in a turban-tying contest in India and make it to base camp—on both sides—of Mount Everest. And those are only some of the adventures he’s enjoyed in the 18 countries through which he’s travelled over the past 14 years.



Make 'em laugh: William Jans at work



In his shows, which almost always sell out, Jans enjoys regaling his audience with these and other tales while changing hats and occasionally pelting his audience with Snickers bars. A high-tech, computer-driven display of his own startling (and often hilarious) photos and video footage projected onto a large screen underscores his high-spirited presentation, and it’s all delivered with the sort of candor and good-natured humour that is largely the basis of Jans’ affinity for Asia.

“It took a while to learn, but I find I’m comfortable with being the brunt of a joke there,” he laughs. “[In this country] if you walked into a room and slipped and fell and everybody started laughing, you’d feel very ill at ease. But in Asia—that sort of thing happening at your expense—if they’re laughing at you, it’s fun and

welcoming.” Accordingly, Jans actually encourages his audiences to laugh at his own misadventures, which include a surreal experience with altitude sickness while trekking up the side of Everest. “I spent four hours in my sleeping bag,” he recalls, “obsessing on how I was going to get the soy beans out from the bottom of my sleeping bag, going through this methodical process of how this was going to happen.” Jans pauses; you can tell there’s a punchline coming. “The fact that there were no soy beans in my sleeping bag had no bearing on it.”

Jans doubts that many members of his audiences will actually visit Asia but, he says, that’s not the point. “I’m sure there are a smattering of people who will follow in my footsteps and check it out. But most just want to see what it’s like, to be exposed to it,” he concludes. “It’s really about taking people vicariously along on this journey.” M

Trekking in Tibet
Friday, November 22. Alix Goolden Hall
Tickets \$13 advance/\$15 at the door. 385-3429