

TRAVEL



Productions by photographer William Jans (right) are more than just slide shows. He mixes images like this one of porters in Machu Picchu, Peru (left), with goofy humour and quirky tales of the absurd.

Travel show-and-tell pulls in the crowds

BY CAROLYN ALI

William Jans is passionate about travel. That much is obvious from the entranceway to his home photography studio in East Vancouver. Shots of him in China, Bolivia, and Vietnam line the walls. Asian textiles hang near a framed certificate from an Indian turban-tying contest. (He came second in the foreigner division of the Jaisalmer Desert festival.) Twenty-nine Coke bottles line a shelf, all virtually identical except for the different foreign scripts. Jans brought each back in his carryon bag—full of pop—from

as far as Cambodia and Peru, with no regard for the sticky mess they would have made if they had broken.

Jans doesn't seem to do anything halfway. Perhaps that's why his three travel slide shows—*Top of the World*, *Trekking in Tibet*, and *Solo in South America*—have been such a hit with audiences. He's set to play them again at the Denman Place Cinema, this week, with *Solo* from Friday to Sunday (February 3, 4, and 5) and *Trekking* next Thursday (February 9). When *Solo* premiered here last April, it filled the 835-seat Ridge Theatre and left another 100 people in line. *Trekking* has sold out the Ridge no less than nine times.

That's pretty impressive for a slide show.

"People think 'slide show—grandpa-rec room,'" Jans tells the *Georgia Straight*. "The concept might sound dry unless a friend of yours has seen it and said, 'Whoa, you've got to see this.' That's what sells me out, word of mouth."

Word has indeed spread. Jans did his first show in 1989 for about 80 people at the Mount Pleasant Community Centre after a trip to Nepal and India. Response was positive, and suddenly he was selling out the Vancouver Planetarium. In 1998, that morphed into his first major show, *Top of the World*,

at the Vogue Theatre. *Trekking in Tibet*, which features his Laos, China, and Tibet travels, premiered in early 2002 at the Ridge. His most recent show on South America features Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and the Galapagos Islands.

Anyone who has seen Jans's productions will tell you that the term *slide show* is inadequate. What Jans does is storytelling, to a backdrop of incredible photographs. It's like travel show-and-tell, amplified by his goofy humour and thousand-watt energy. He embellishes with music, video clips, audio clips of things like animal and traffic noises and conversation snippets,

as well as costume changes. Sometimes he even sets up those Coke bottles at intermission and lets people guess where each is from.

Jans hones in on the quirky and makes it real to the audience. When he talks about how the price of chocolate increases with the elevation at Everest, he throws out Snickers bars. After sharing his experiences of a silver-mine tour in Bolivia, he pulls out the 96-proof Ceibo alcohol that the miners drink and offers up shots.

But the images drive the show, and they are spectacular. Jans is a full-time professional photographer who

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does mostly corporate assignments. About once every three years, he takes off to travel for about two-and-a-half months.

Jans is particularly proud of how well-paced and well-edited his shows are, which helps them stay interesting. It takes him about a year to build and edit each one. "It's an obsession. I don't think there's anything I work harder on than these. It's a passion," he says.

Although he's finally starting to turn a profit in Vancouver, the cost of touring through Edmonton, Calgary, Ottawa, Toronto, and Vancouver Island offsets that. "I can sure tell you that the arts doesn't pay," Jans says with a laugh. So why does he do it? "Everybody goes on trips and takes pictures for the joy of coming back and going. 'Hey, look where I went!' Well, it sure is a kick to do it in front of a thousand people at a time."

Jans travels on a low budget and seeks out local interaction. "I travel for people; I love meeting people," he says. He always tries to learn as much of the local language as possible, and he's not averse to making a fool of himself. "I learned years ago overseas that being the brunt of a joke isn't a bad thing...when something goes wrong and you're being laughed at, people warm up to you."

Jans endears himself to the audience with his candour and his tales of language faux pas and getting ripped off. In his *Solo* show, he shows video footage of himself being robbed in Cuzco, Peru; he just happened to be filming a festival at the time and discovered later that his camera had captured the moment of truth.

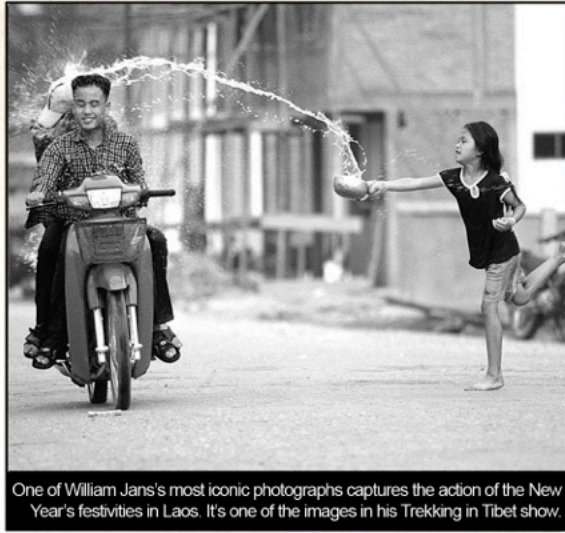
Given all the equipment he uses to bring back his images, it's surprising that Jans travels alone—without a camera crew, never mind someone to guard his valuables when he showers. He did rig up an impressive

decoy "journal" to hide his laptop in for his South American trip, which he displays at the *Solo* show.

He may yet have a camera crew some day. Jans has been approached with three separate proposals for his own television show: one on Asian cooking, another on archaeology, and a third on adventure travel. Nothing has panned out yet, but he's open to possibilities.

In the meantime, he'll keep putting on these shows as long as people still want to see them. "I just love telling the stories." ♦

For more information on William Jans's shows or to buy tickets, see www.wrjphoto.com/. *Solo in South America* runs from Friday to Sunday (February 3, 4 and 5) and *Trekking in Tibet* is next Thursday (February 9). All shows take place at Denman Place Cinema (1779 Comox Street) and start at 8 p.m. (doors at 7:15 p.m.). Tickets are \$18 in advance or \$20 at the door, if not sold out.



One of William Jans's most iconic photographs captures the action of the New Year's festivities in Laos. It's one of the images in his *Trekking in Tibet* show.