

The Escape Artist
Winning Essay of the 2005 University of Alabama International Essay Contest
By Megan Parks

“Look at me. Do I seem crazy?” Under the circumstances I didn’t believe I could have accurately answered Shirley’s question. We stood knee deep in wool, covered in mud, blood, and smears of sheep crap. Classic rock hits by artists such as Queen, Jackson Five, and Led Zeppelin drifted from the corner of the shearing shed. I thought most people would have considered us both slightly insane for voluntarily working for a week on a sheep farm in New Zealand.

I inspected Shirley more carefully. She appeared normal to me—petite, chin length curly blond hair, blue eyes, fashionably framed glasses, jeans, and a t-shirt. The simple superficial question struck me more deeply. Shirley and her boyfriend Eran were Israelis. Before traveling to New Zealand I had never met anyone from Israel. Due to the media’s coverage of the region’s hardships, I had this preconceived notion there would be a noticeable difference between an Israeli and me if for no other reason than how opposite our lives must be.

“You know I’m crazy, don’t you? That’s what they think,” Shirley said, smiling as she collected more wool. I questioningly looked to Eran, but he just shrugged. “It took almost a year to convince them I’m crazy, but I did and now I’m here,” she said between giggles. A wave of uneasiness washed over me as I realized my only allies against this self-proclaimed insane person were her boyfriend and hundreds of sheep violated by shearing.

Shirley was referring to her stunt to be released from the army. In Israel, both males and females began a mandatory three year service in the Israeli army when they turned eighteen years old. Shirley, an incredibly strong-willed person, decided she would not serve her army sentence. The only way to be released was to be declared insane, which was what she accomplished. After her release, she worked as a counselor for abused children before her New Zealand trip. Shirley was two years younger than me, twenty years old.

Throughout my six-month trip I came to know many people from Israel. Most were having what they called “their world experience.” They had completed their duty in the army and were in the midst of spending time abroad before returning to Israel for college or work. Coming from two completely different cultures, I feared we would have nothing in common, but I could not have been more wrong.

For months I did not understand why I easily mingled with females not only from Israel, but from around the world. I was afraid to question how we could cross the familiarity of our own worlds and enjoy each other so effortlessly while the media constantly bombarded us with stories of violent cultural clashes. Rather than criticize cultural norms,

it was those differences that sparked the energy, curiosity, and friendliness floating through the hostels.

One afternoon as I sat on the Raglan beach, recovering from a morning of surfing, my friend Sabrina asked if I wanted to know the real reason she was in New Zealand. I nodded sure, wondering what twist the conversation would take. “I had to leave Germany. I had a horrible breakup with my boyfriend, and felt as if I were suffocating. I ran. I escaped my life.”

I studied my new friend, amazed at her complete honesty, and had a realization. Once the barriers created from living in different cultures were stripped away, the women I met in New Zealand were eerily similar to each other and to me. Although traditions, beliefs, environments, and norms governed how each woman reacted to particular situations, we all fought the battle to find “The One,” worried about our futures, struggled with family, were unhappy with current world politics, afraid of making mistakes, and dreamed of “what if....”

We were all escape artists. Whether from a former lover, politically motivated, work, or the mundane, all the female travelers I met had escaped some aspect of their lives and cultures back home. Unwittingly this band of escape artists had molded their own unique subculture—the culture of the backpacker.

The travel writer Pico Iyer once wrote, “Abroad is the place where we stay up late, follow impulse, and find ourselves as wide open as when we are in love. We live without a past or future, for a moment at least, and are ourselves up for grabs and open to interpretation.” It was that sense of displacement, vulnerability, and boldness that bonded backpackers so quickly, without hesitation.

I believed that on some level each of us recognized the discrepancy between living and feeling alive. The links that dissolved cultural boundaries, bridging together the female travelers of New Zealand, were the passion and determination to experience life rather than numbly stumble through it.