

Iyer tours lonely backwaters of the world

by Robert Currie

There's something about a North Korean theme park that just doesn't ring true. Not the wonky promotional propaganda—"Mad mouse makes you feel rhythmical and buoyant." Not the fact that North Korea is perhaps the most improbable place on the globe for a theme park—"A xenophobic hermit state run by an octogenarian madman." What hits you is the simple loneliness of a place that seems utterly unconnected with the outside world.

Literature
Falling Off The Map
Pico Iyer

In *Falling Off the Map*, travel writer Pico Iyer visits the Lonely Places, the places other people do not, can not, and in most cases, probably should not visit. Iyer finds himself in hotels usually sub-standard, often deserted in such tourist meccas as Vietnam, Paraguay and Bhutan, where the staff is willing, but the electricity (and the plumbing,

and the phone system, and the elevator) is weak.

In slogan-bedecked Vietnam ("To keep money in the bank is patriotic") Iyer discovers the government declared 1990 "Year of Tourism," and proceeded to tear down all the hotels.

Paraguay turns out to be a land of "lazy illegitimacy," its history a roll-call of corrupt dictators, futile, bloody wars and the torpor which comes out of institutionalized corruption.

Cuba seems lost somewhere between Stalin and the end of the

Eisenhower administration, and not quite sure how to move on.

Yet *Falling Off the Map* seldom lapses into condescension, or worse, gloating enthusiasm. Iyer is detached, wittily observant, and urbane. (No surprise there, after you read his back-page bio: educated at Eton, Oxford, Harvard. A contributing editor at *Condé Nast Traveller*. Not exactly Red Fisher.)

Lonely Places are often contradictory places. Anti-imperialist propaganda is everywhere in Cuba, but nothing, not even running over one of the local children, elicits more than a dismissive wave from the authorities. In Buenos Aires, Iyer finds Argentinians so desperate to appear European that they have adopted

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15



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