

# On Being Out There

**ESCHEWING GRAD SCHOOL, A HISTORY MAJOR TAKES OFF FOR GLOBAL ADVENTURES. HERE'S WHAT HE'S LEARNED.** ESSAY AND PHOTOS BY AARON TEASDALE '93

**T**he Vietnamese military officer stepped onto the road, thrust his hand face-out in an unmistakable sign, and commanded us to stop. We grabbed our bicycle brake levers and I shot a glance at my father. He'd fought here during the war—we were back to see what happened to the charismatic people he felt he'd abandoned—and had no love for his former opponents in the military. Things were about to get interesting.



**WHO ELSE PUT THEMSELVES OUT THERE RECENTLY?  
THE GUSTAVUS CHOIR. SEE PAGE 20**

At Gustavus, the young man from [hometown here], spent his time [insert clubs? Activities? Favorite pasttimes? Hangouts?] Today he is a two-time Travel Writer of the Year from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation, and a nine-time Lowell Thomas Award Winner, including best stories in Adventure Travel, Environmental Travel, and Investigative Reporting.



**“IN MANY WAYS,  
MY ADULT LIFE IS  
SIMPLY  
A CONTINUATION OF  
MY GUSTAVUS LIFE.  
I’M CONSTANTLY  
LEARNING AND I  
OFTEN STAY UP ALL  
NIGHT WORKING ON  
PAPERS DUE THE  
NEXT DAY.”**



The moment that led me here, to this dirt road in the mountains of remotest northern Vietnam, came in my bedroom at Gustavus in 1993. I’d just taken the GRE, professor-dom in my sights. Yet there I sat, my inchoate future before me, imagining faraway places. My mind sparked and it hit me: Grad school could wait, I needed to see the world.

Twenty-five years later, grad school is still waiting and I’ve been happily exploring since. With a talent for landing in hair-raising situations, I began writing stories about my misadventures and magazines promptly published them. Inspired, I studied photography and my peregrinations soon grew into a career as a writer and photographer. Living out of a Volkswagen van and seeking adventure, I roamed the land, pen and camera in hand.

The more I traveled and the more I wrote, the more I understood how my Gustavus education prepared me by teaching me to think critically and put people, places, and experiences into a larger context. Good writing is good thinking. As a history major, my education is foundational to my work—you can’t understand the present without knowing the past.

At some point, I met a cute girl at a Rainbow Gathering in New Mexico and, after knowing each other for a week, we decamped to South America for two months. Progeny soon followed and we found ourselves living off the grid with two young children in a century-old homestead cabin in the wilds of Montana, burning wood for heat and chopping away creek ice for water. We eventually settled into civilization’s embrace in the college town of Missoula and, as our two sons grew, we took six-week mountain bike tours through the Canadian Rockies and skipped school for a year to roam Central America. It



wasn’t easy, but those trips bonded our family like nothing else.

Consider the jungle of Nicaragua. We spent days traveling down the Rio San Juan in increasingly smaller boats, the boys in a constant state of wonder over the rainbow-colored birds and buzzing intensity of tropical wilderness. There, amid the hemisphere’s largest non-Amazonian rainforest, we stayed in a small, simple lodge run by a former Sandinista general. This woman, a revolutionary who some considered an enemy of America in the 1980s, didn’t mind that we came from the country that supported the dictator she risked her life to overthrow. Every night in a simple kitchen she cooked food for my family. She pointed us to the best creeks for paddleboarding and told us where to see crocodiles and tapirs. My boys learned more about people and the world on that trip than they ever could have in desk rows.

I’m driven almost entirely by curiosity. As a global writer, I’m essentially a



Among other adventures, Teasdale and his wife, Jacqueline, once mountain-biked unsupported from Glacier National Park to Banff over five weeks with their 11- and 7-year-old sons on a tandem bike with a trailer on the back. Later, they took the kids out of school for a year to explore Central America.



professional curious person. I always want to know what can be seen from the top of the mountain, what it's like to paddle with whales, mountain bike with giraffes, or ski with grizzly bears. What are people like in Guatemala, Jordan, and Kenya?

Curiosity is one of the most important traits of a global citizen—it kills the “isms.” The more people you meet in the world, the more disdain you will have for racism or classism or nationalism. We're all making our way through this life the best we can. The more you travel the more you realize a fundamental truth: People are good.

Whether it's the man living in a Bolivian cave who fed me quinoa soup cooked over a fire at the end of a long bike ride, the Hmong grandfather in a Vietnamese street market who cheerfully insisted the strange-looking foreigner share his corn liquor for breakfast, the Maasai warriors in Tanzania who taught me how

to throw a spear at a charging lion, or the Muslim men in Jordan who eagerly cared for me when I injured my leg in an accident, the vast majority of human beings on this planet are honest, caring people who will go far out of their way to help strangers in need. Or get you tipsy for breakfast, which you might not need, but will make for a good story someday.

Every day that doesn't include something—a moment or interaction or sight that could make for a good story—is a day that feels in some small way wasted. As Mike Horn, famous for (among other things) completing a one-year, six-month solo journey around the equator without any motorised transport, once told me, “We have 30,000 days to live in this life, so you owe it to yourself to live each one to its fullest.” It can be scary to be different, but if you're open-hearted and lead with kindness—something the caring community at Gustavus can cement in

young adults—you will be embraced.

That's the most important thing I've learned in my 47 years—get out there. Whether it's halfway around the planet or to the state park down the road, get outside every day. I'm a nature writer too, and I believe strongly that we all need time, as much as possible, in the natural world, the world we evolved in, the world that soothes our nerves and vitalizes our spirit in ways that being walled inside or in front of screens never can. Whether we know it or not, it's home.

My utter disregard for societal expectations has always left me a bit of an outsider. I do not own a tie, nor the neighborhood's nicest car. I do, however, have tents for every conceivable combination of season, terrain, and party size. I wouldn't trade the experiences I've had in those tents for any possessions. My ethos is simple: Spread love, get outside, explore the world.

That's what we were aiming to do in Vietnam, as we biked through the vaulting Karst mountains of the Ha Giang province. When the military man stopped us at the remote checkpoint, I braced for the worst. I could see Dad go flinty-eyed. He knew the man's uniform all too well—they were the ones trying to kill him. But instead of a weapon, the man in green and red brandished a smile.

“Where you from?” he wanted to know. Were we enjoying his beautiful country? I let him try my mountain bike, which he pedaled with obvious glee. As we prepared to say goodbye, he indicated he wanted a picture with us, his new friends. We all stood together, former enemies arm in arm, smiles on our faces and goodwill in our hearts. Turns out the people of Vietnam hadn't lost the cheerful vitality my dad loved. We just needed to come and say hello. ●

Aaron and his son, [name here], in [location here].



**“ONE THING I FIGURED OUT QUICKLY IS THAT THE WORLD ISN'T NEARLY AS DANGEROUS AS THE NAYSAYERS WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE.”**



Teasdale with a Vietnamese military officer and his dad, [name here], a veteran of the Vietnam War, in the Ha Giang province during their father-son biking trip through Vietnam.

## Who Lives Abroad?

**WE CAN'T EVEN BEGIN TO LIST ALL OF THEM, BUT HERE'S A SAMPLING OF GUSTIES LIVING LIVES OF PURPOSE IN A WIDE VARIETY OF INDUSTRIES AND LOCALES OUTSIDE OF THE U.S. GO GUSTIES!**

Kazuo Tanikawa x'56 (exchange student), house of representatives in Japan | Sten Hammar '59, ophthalmologist in Denmark | Anne Shumate '60, theater owner and director in Ireland | Gloria Floreen '68, professor of solfeggio in Switzerland | Jean Bjorling Young '70, medical superintendent and surgeon in West Africa | Mark Sallmen '73, tour guide in Finland | Jan Lowrey Groves '75, university researcher in England | David Olson '75, bookstore manager in Norway | Enriqueta Salazar '76, psychologist in Guatemala | Thad '78 and Michael '82 Peterson, safari tour company owners in Tanzania | Felipe Bernstein '79, partner/president of a data company in Chile | Linda Styve Buisson '79, banking vice president in France | James Costello '82, dentist in Hong Kong | Eric Lindberg '85, diplomat in Cuba | Terri Alexander Mahoney '86, bank portfolio manager in the Netherlands | Steve Hillmer '87, English professor in Saudi Arabia | Cindy Javoroski '87, director of capital markets in Spain | Sven Thierhoff x'88 (exchange student), entertainment licensing in Germany | Laura Westby '88, general counsel in Switzerland | Tim Gilbertson '89, controller in Republic of Singapore | Barbro Jonsson x'89 (exchange student), the Nobel Foundation in Sweden | Tracey Schultz Connor '90, human resources manager in England | Christian Dummer '91, pharmaceutical business operations director in Italy | Jon Oliphant '91, nightclub owner in China | Jeff Ostman '91, company president in France | Dinah Essilfie-Bondzie '93, IT manager in Ghana | Ritskuko Morishita '93, television director and researcher in Japan | Benetus Nangombe '93, policy director in Namibia | David Wiberg '93, water management in Austria | Kristia Hisey Fleming '95, natural resource policy manager in Australia | Phil Miesle '95, software architect in Ireland | Kristopher Krajewski '97, senior clinical research administrator in Switzerland | Oageng Melato '98, automotive marketing liaison in South Africa | Kiril Avramov '99, marketing director in Hungary | Nate Brase '99, risk management in Hong Kong | Tina Lohmann-Andrews '00 publications production manager in England | Elisabeth Olson '00, general counsel in Canada | Piyush Sonpal '00, real estate developer in India | Graziela Tanaka '01, nonprofit director in Brazil | Michael Formas '02, banking operations manager in Bermuda | Irfan Rasiwala '02, merchandising director in Canada | Marcus Schmidt '02, medical researcher in the Netherlands | Anne Wenstrom '03, Peace Corps in Republic of Singapore | Kevin Matuseki '10, sixth-grade teacher in Columbia | Baffour Appiah-Korang '11, taxi company director in Ghana | Kelly Broady '11, genetics counselor in Germany | Juan Luis Chu '14, Medtronic in Peru

Gusties home and abroad: Have you checked in with us recently? We'd love to learn where you are and what you're up to. Send us a dispatch at [gustavus.edu/alumni](mailto:gustavus.edu/alumni).