

January 2002

Dear Friends,

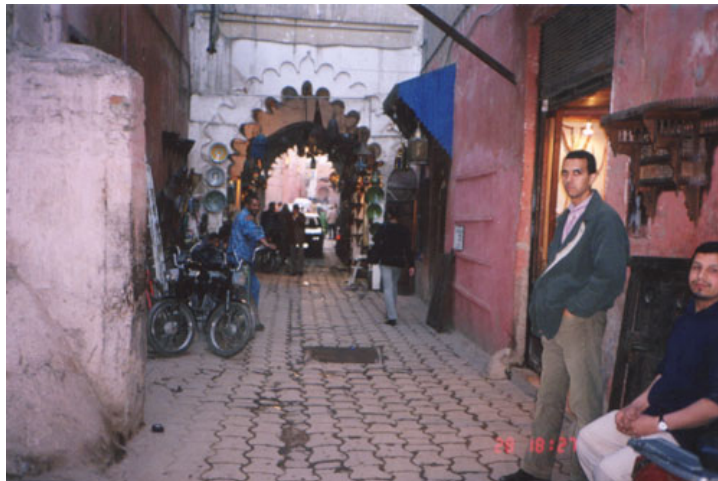
Happy New Year to you all! I am very excited to tell you about this past year for it was truly a watershed year in dance for me.

To begin with I was given a lectureship teaching Middle Eastern Dance at UCSB. It is the first ethnic dance class taught at this university. I am thrilled that Middle Eastern dance was selected and proud to have the opportunity to teach it.

In addition to this appointment I have recently completed a worldwide trip doing dance research and buying products for my new business, Caravan Imports, located here in Santa Barbara. I visited Morocco, Spain, Egypt, Turkey, Greece and Indonesia and spent about a month in each country shopping, studying dance and making friends. Here are some highlights from each country to share with you.

MOROCCO

Morocco was the usual exotic and sultry country it always is, filled with incredible drama and beauty. Probably the highlight dance experience was the very disappointing “Folkloric” Show in Marrakesh. What was billed as a folkloric show was really a Las Vegas Review featuring Russian dancers performing Musical-like vignettes in Penthouse costumes, (Maids in mini-skirts with feather-dusters; SnowQueen coast which opened and exposed a skimpy swimming suit, etc.) In between their performances, a folkloric ensemble came out and gave a very mundane performance in a line-up that was more like a police line-up – every one of them was dead-pan and bored out of their minds. The entire program was VERY incongruous and talentless. Moroccans & Russian show girls....go figure!?! Alas, I guess the Russians have come and they have taken over!



Souk in Marrakesh. March 2001

SPAIN

I went to Spain to see the country and to continue my study of flamenco. While there I visited Grenada and wandered around the caves of Sacramento where the gypsies have lived and danced for over 600 years and where much of flamenco was born. Also visited the beautiful town of Jerez de la Frontera and its fabulous Centro de Flamenco, a library which houses pretty much every document, (literary, audio and video), ever made about flamenco.



In Spain I found very cool lodgings in Sevilla, (where I spent most of my time), living in an old hacienda, (a white elephant), owned by a German “vagabond” musician, (that’s what he called himself, proudly - he was kind of a white elephant himself), who only boarded dancers and musicians.

I took classes with a wonderful teacher, Carmen de Torres, and danced in an Arabic Tea House called Club Chaouan which was one of a few of its kind in Triana, the old gypsy quarter of Sevilla. I was there during the Semana Santa, Spain’s holiest holiday commemorating Christ’s crucifixion, and enjoyed observing this, one of Catholicism’s great annual events. I was also fortunate to be there during the Feria – the big fiesta of Spain –, which puts Santa Barbara’s “Fiesta” to shame!

Performing in Club Chaouan. Triana, Spain - April 2001

I must say, my time spent in Spain was perhaps the happiest and most fulfilling and the Spanish are some of the happiest, most enthusiastic people I have ever come across anywhere. Spain was one of my favorite countries. I hope to return there someday.

EGYPT

When I left on my trip in March I had had no solid contacts and had no confirmed accommodations. I really took a leap of faith doing it this way and most of the time this did not present any problems. I believe this was because I never once felt afraid. The entire trip I had the faith and exhilaration of a child and I believe that this, combined with having a couple of angels on my shoulders, got me through a lot.



Tent-maker's Souk. Khan al-Khalili. Cairo, Egypt - May 2001

Near the end of my stay in Sevilla I still had no confirmed place to stay in Egypt, however, through a friend back home (by Internet) I found a super couple to stay with for the duration of the month in Egypt. I lived with them on their houseboat in the neighborhood of Kit Kat (a former red light district, I’m told). Next “boat” to us was a doctor’s (GP) private residence, which he used for his mistress.

Bill and Bridget, (my hosts), were very well connected in Cairo, he being a prominent photographer and she a teacher in a private high school, and, as their guest I was befriended by both my hosts as well as their social group. It was a group of exciting and excited young ex-pats from around the world living and working in Cairo. They had escaped from their disillusionment back home and come here to “find themselves” (shades of the 60’s!). Happily, I had friends to help me, to play with, and get entrée to many wonderful events such as art openings and consulate parties.

I went to Egypt to study Haggala and my dream came true. I met and befriended a former students family – a wealthy Coptic family who live in Heliopolis. They own a fabulous four-star hotel in Marsah Matruh called Beau Site, recognized as Marsah Matruh’s best hotel. Marsah Matruh is a small coastal town in Lower Egypt and it is the center of origin of the Haggala, a men’s wedding dance. I was very fortunate when they invited me to be their guest for a four day stay in Beau Site, gratis! Not only was I given the treat of a four-day paid vacation on the coast of the Mediterranean, but, they also put on a concert of Haggala with the local Bedouins in my honor! What a show! What a weekend! What wonderful people they were. They truly exemplified Arabic hospitality and I got a great firsthand experience with Haggala!

Back in Cairo I saw Dina’s show and was not impressed at all. The orchestra had enough brass to be a swing band. The dance she did was more of a fashion show than a belly dance performance as she went off after every song and changed costumes, which became quite disruptive. Throughout the performance she did little to no taxsim or any other contrasting work to balance the incessant fast-paced 4/4. My bottom line impression of Dina is that she has technical ability, (although she’s a bit stiff and frenetic), and definite panache, but lacks the softness and grace that is the benchmark of belly dance. I decided that if she is the pinnacle of the belly dance experience in Egypt, these days, well, then, somewhere in time Egyptian belly dance has lost it’s true identity as belly dance.



Sufi show. Khan al-Khalili. Cairo, Egypt - May 2001

On the other hand, if you haven’t seen them and you are in Egypt, go see the Sufis perform at the Khan el-Khalili mosque – they are superb! The music and dance is absolutely spectacular and the show will leave you breathless!

As for the shopping it was as always a shoppers dream come true! I am anxious to return and buy for the company, my store and myself!

TURKEY

American belly dance has its roots in Turkish belly dance so for an old-timer like myself it was more a real treat to go to Turkey. It was a treat, not only because my roots are in this style, but also, because I present a lot of Turkish dance with my company and had the opportunity to see and learn, first hand, many wonderful Turkish folk dances. Most interesting for me was/is Black Sea dance. It is a dynamic line dance in which men hold

their arms up and their hands hang and bob as the tempo builds into a furious pace and they perform more and more complex steps and movements. It is thrilling to behold! I saw Black Sea dancers everywhere but the best were at a club in Taxsim called Caravanseray.



Kurdish singers in a club in Taxsim – new section of Istanbul. June 2001

For me the dance and music of Turkey are light years ahead of Egypt's in quality and authenticity. To begin with, the Turks have not compromised the integrity of their music and dance by synthesizing it with other dance styles – (except Egyptian cabaret. Interestingly enough, most cabaret dancers were emulating Egyptian dancers and using Egyptian music. A pity, as the influences of Turkish folkloric dance are what create the peculiarity of their cabaret, just as the influence of Egyptian folkloric do with the Egyptian cabaret. Nonetheless, for the most part in Turkey – whether in the streets or in a cabaret, one will see original folk and belly dance with indigenous instruments, rather than the mixture of Western instruments, dance and music as in Egypt.



Dancing with young girls from Bitlis, Eastern Turkey. June 2001

Additionally, Turkish clubs go out of their way to accommodate visiting dancers who are there to see the dance and hear the music. When videoing the hosts of clubs always made sure I had the best vantage point to shoot from, in contrast to Egyptian clubs which prohibit videoing of shows! The music was all acoustic and authentic and all in all, the club experience was very grand and entertaining! I must say, while I appreciate the

dignity that Egypt has brought to the dance, I feel it goes too far and becomes too serious about it all. After all, it is as much – if not more – entertainment as it is art. The Turks have a sense of perspective and humor about the art, while maintaining dignity and poise, I appreciate a lot.

I was impressed by the fact that the gypsies are the omnipresent and consummate musicians everywhere in the country. I was lucky enough to dance in a couple of shows with gypsy musicians who really ROCKED - they wailed on their instruments and I got to wail in my dance with such incredible music! (Also, it was such a pleasure to dance a taxsim to a clarinet – a rare experience these days!)

The countryside of Turkey is awesome. From the conical eruptions of Cappadocia to the fire holes in Olimpos. All in all it was an exotic and captivating country.

But most of all, I can't say enough about Turkish music and dance. It went beyond all my dreams and expectations of seeing and learning dance on the trip. Any chance you get to take a trip with a US dancer such as Judeen, Artemis or Eva, do so – you won't regret it! I have to say that next to Spain, Turkey was one of my two favorite destinations on this trip!

GREECE

For twelve wonderful years I was the featured dancer at the popular Santa Barbara Greek restaurant, The Plaka. During those years I fell madly in love with Greek music, dance and culture. Although it is not Middle Eastern it became my favorite kind of music and dance and so I looked forward to visiting Greece with great anticipation! Sadly, it did not meet my expectations – mostly because I went during the height of the tourist season and the hottest time of the year July. I had been warned about the difficulties this presented, and all the warnings turned out to be horribly real.



Athens: Acropolis. July 2001

I made my way by ferry to Rhodes via Marmaris, Turkey in early July. I went to Rhodes because of the famous dance company, the Nelly Dimoglou Dancers. Rhodes City is nothing if not a very modern shopping center overlaying an ancient medieval city. It was built by priests to protect Rhodes from Turkish invaders. They failed at this but left behind a fascinating city with towering walls and cobblestone streets. I hated the overbearing tourism, but, thoroughly enjoyed the Dimoglou Dance ensemble and went to

every performance while there! What a thrill! I even had a private lesson with Ms. Dimoglou herself which was hysterically funny, but that's another, long story!

Next stop was Crete and what a beautiful island it is! I arrived in Sitia on the extreme eastern end of the island and went to see "The Ancient Palace" – an interesting archeological site. I spent the night in a chez lounge on a rocky beach (there were no rooms available anywhere!). I sat under the full moon and spent about two hours talking with a handsome Greek guy eating watermelon and drinking Oozo. As the evening unfolded, he got a little fresh which required me to utilize my (minimal) Kung-Fu skills...gently removing him from my person.

Then to Hania in the West. A stunning city! There I hiked across the island through the Samaria gorge – twenty miles – through an absolutely breathtaking landscape! At the end of the trek, I arrived at a small village to catch the ferry back to Hania, but before I got



onboard, I walked to the waters edge and jumped in. I was completely exhausted, red-faced and sweating. I'm sure the folks on the boat with me wondered who in the world is this madwoman who jumped in the water and walked on board dripping wet! I slept most of the way and arrived back in Hania relaxed and ready to explore the city at night.

Me with the Holly Nelly Dimoglou Dance Company after the show. Rhodes, Greece - July 2001

My angels not only protected me from predators, but they assisted me in locating the best places and situations as a dancer. While wondering around the streets of Hania that night I found a very cool little café – The Cretan Café - in the maze of streets which make up this old Venetian city. The place for locals, so, everyone looked at me like a freak....and then truly freaked out when I jumped up and joined in on a Pentozali! There were instruments on the walls, which the musicians would take down and play all night long. I went back there several times – for the music and Oozo, as well as the dashing Greek musician I was smitten by. No, I never did anything about it – (just didn't want to ruin the fantasy with a dose of reality).

After ten days in Crete I took another ferry to Athens where everything seemed to go downhill. Here is where my "leap of faith" had me landing flat on my face! Plans I'd made did not work out and in general I found the Athenians to be quite rude, dishonest and in short it was all very horrible! I had hoped to see the famous Rhea perform, but, ironically, she was in Rhodes performing where I had just come from! Had hoped to take classes with the famous Dora Stratou Dance Company, but, alas, their fee was a whopping \$400/week!! Yikes! I did get to see them perform and oh, what a treat! Rembetiko clubs were \$75 just to get in and I heard that the music was mediocre at best. Despite these disappointments, I stuck it out for 10 days but was most happy to be on my way to Indonesia on August 3rd!

INDONESIA

I had planned to go to India first and spend a month there but was unable to because I couldn't get a visa in time. In a way I was glad not to go as I had had enough of the heat and the grime and hardship of the Middle East. I loved it there but after four months I was getting worn down and very homesick. I had heard that India was worse. So, I welcomed the idea of the balmy breezes and laid back, tropical life and friendliness of Indonesia – and I wasn't disappointed!

I arrived in Jakarta, Java, after 2 days of flying. I slept for 17 hours and then explored the city. It is the filthiest and most polluted city I have ever been in. Additionally, the day I arrived a department store was bombed by Muslim terrorists, (Java is Muslim). I took a hint and got a train to Panganderan, a small village in south Java - immediately. Stayed there to rest for five days. I was pretty much alone in a beautiful tropical setting in a grass bungalow for \$4/night eating fresh fish, fruits and veggies every day – truly paradise! A far cry from the hustle and bustle I had come from in Greece! Ahhhh! Relief.

Went on to Jojakarta in central Java and there I shopped and visited temples. It was a splendid place. But, once again, terrorists struck and 20 miles north of Jojakarta 16 tourists were kidnapped and killed. So, I once again exited and this time flew to Bali – a Hindu island and a major tourist destination.



In Bali I spent most of the time in Ubud, an artists village and there I shopped and went to music and dance performances almost every night. Bali lived up to its reputation as a beautiful place with incredible shopping and very friendly people. I spent the final leg of my trip with my family, (son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter) and it was one of the happiest experiences of my life! We spent two days on the beach in cabanas, surfing, eating fresh fish

and “chilling”. What a great ending to a perfect trip!

Dreamland Beach; Bukit peninsula, Bali - Sept. 2001 - Surfing is fabulous here! Spent two weeks "chillin" with the family.

Well, that's about it! My store is about to be launched. It will feature dance supplies as well as Middle Eastern imports such as lamps, lanterns, camel saddles, rugs – eventually. So far my new direction with dance and this business have been uncannily successful. I hope you will all visit my site once up and visit me here in Santa Barbara if you pass through. I welcome fellow dancers as guests.

This coming year, 2002, should be a fabulous one. Please share it with me anytime! I look forward to hearing from you.

Best Regards,

Alexandra King