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## One minute getaway

Site is devoted to sounds of the world

**KALI PEARSON**

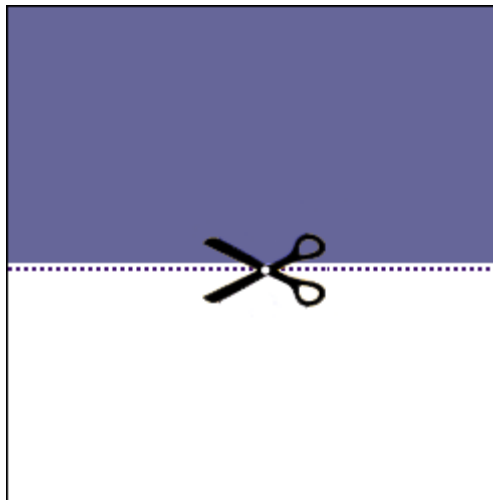
Freelance

Saturday, January 25, 2003

Junk mail is a year-round phenomenon. But in winter, when glossy brochures promising "free" vacations in Cuba are strewn on the slush-covered stairs, it's more than an annoyance. It's torture.

After all, before we can jet off to sunnier climes, most of us have to dig out from under the mountain of holiday bills - and make it through February. While the Internet won't help you win a free trip to Cuba this month (despite what you might see in your junk mail folder), there is a site that can provide you a mini-vacation right in your own home.

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www.quietamerican.org is devoted to the sounds of the world, recorded and presented on a simple but slick-looking Web site by aural artist (and computer programmer by day) Aaron Ximm of San Francisco. The premise of the site, he says, is to encourage people to stop and really listen to the world around them. To that end, he launched a subsite devoted to "one-minute vacations" ([www.quietamerican.org/vacation.html](http://www.quietamerican.org/vacation.html)) submitted by himself and visitors to the site.

Ximm says the recordings are designed to be not only an escape, but also a tutorial of sorts on how to listen. He notes that too many travellers these days fail to really pay attention to the sounds around them.

"Unless we're physically impaired or isolated, we spend our days hearing all sorts of things," he says. "It's only occasionally that we choose to listen."

Ximm first started making sound recordings while travelling around Vietnam in 1998. "I recorded musicians, trains, moving water, crickets, monks, markets, metalwork, tired animals, and drunken tourists," he says. To date, he has accumulated hundreds of sound files from around the world and his native San Francisco (which is still exotic to us!)

In its first year, the "one-minute vacations" project has amassed 52 unedited samples. There's a recording of the annual Jan. 1 dive into the North Sea off the Netherlands, a ferry cruising past a remote harbour near Sydney, Australia, an impromptu evening concert in Cambodia, all of which paint a picture far richer than any brochure.

"Recently I've gotten positive comments from people who have lived in, or been to, some of the places recorded," Ximm says. "Something that comes up in those letters is how listening to a recording returns you to an experience in a way that a photograph does not - at least, not in our image-saturated culture."

Ximm thinks the tracks on his site can help his audience train their ears and minds to pay more attention on their next vacation. He encourages listening with "the third ear - it's tongue-in-cheek, after the idea of the third eye, but it's also a gentle admonition to listen with focused attention."

He says the way to get the most out of travelling - and something he says too few travellers do - is to really pay attention to the sounds around them. "Attention turned on our environment can only raise our


appreciation of it and concern for it.

"But for me listening provides its own rewards, regardless of consequences. It is constantly an exploration of the unexpected, the serendipitous. There is a whole world waiting to be heard."

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