

Tips from a world traveller

Travelling a foreign country, alone, is not for everyone. But for those interested in doing it, there are a few things you should do before you go.

First, research countries that interest you. Search blogs written by solo backpackers for recommended locations, as well as information on areas to stay away from, and talk to friends for ideas.

"The grapevine is a good way to get around because you get a guide book and people are like 'don't go to the hotel it says in there, go to this one, it's cheaper and better,'" world traveller David Dissette said.

SAVING MONEY

Once you've got an idea of where you want to go, check the Canadian government's travel advisory website - www.voyage.ca - for warnings and reports, information on visa requirements, as well as the laws and regulations in various countries. Next, create an itinerary and leave one with your family.

When you arrive in a new country, travel to your pre-booked hotel or hostel in the more expensive/authorized taxis and ensure the driver has proper identification. Avoid arriving in a new town or city late at night.

To save money, share cars with other travellers when possible and don't forget about public transit.

An obvious money trap is touristy restaurants. Pass right by them and find out where the locals eat — the food will no doubt be better than what's served to the "tourists".

Losing your passport, money, travelers' cheques and credit cards can ruin a trip, so split your documentation and cash up throughout your body.

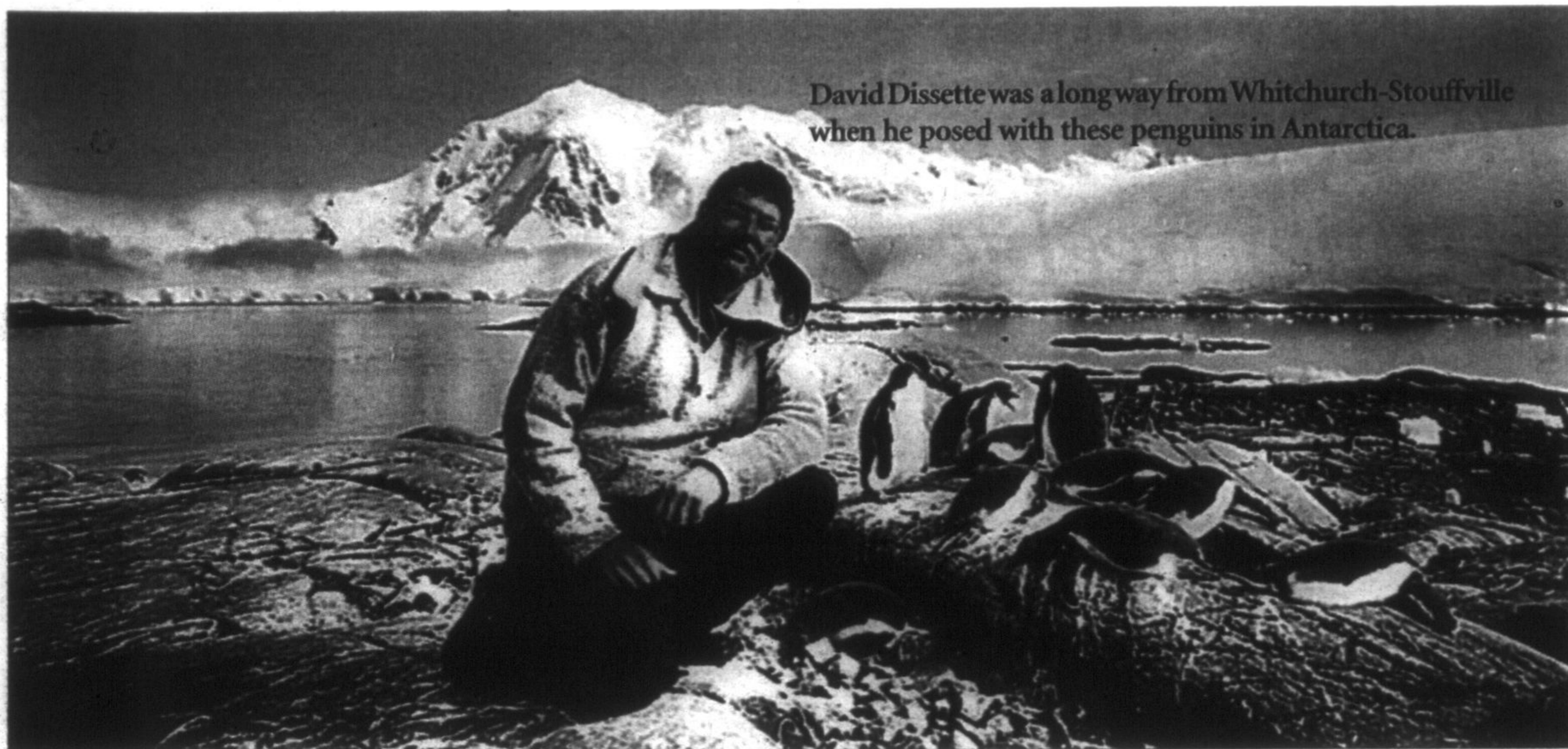
HIGH CRIME RATES

Some countries with high petty crime rates, including pick pocketing, are Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia. Not as bad as them, but countries that still require you to be cautious are Italy, Spain, Israel and Thailand. On the other hand, Hong Kong and New Zealand are deemed to be very safe.

"I've run into incredible people, but far more people will have their hand out," Mr. Dissette said.

Females, unfortunately, have to take special precautions, as many Western women are assumed to be promiscuous.

Depending on the country you're in, eye contact can give men the green light to approach.



David Dissette was a long way from Whitchurch-Stouffville when he posed with these penguins in Antarctica.

103 countries on his passport - and counting

Stouffville landscaper has hit the road solo for 25 winters

BY SANDRA BOLAN
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David Dissette has been robbed at gunpoint in Cambodia, jailed in Egypt and Somalia, arrested for taking a photo in Guinea, and has survived a cyclone as well as bouts of malaria, dengue fever and amebic dysentery.

The Whitchurch-Stouffville landscaper has also hiked the Inca trail through Peru, dove with great white sharks in South Africa, got up and close and personal with mountain gorillas in Uganda, pretended to be a speculator at a diamond field and visited the world's only pirate cemetery in Madagascar.

MET GORILLAS, ATE DOG AND SNAKE

Mr. Dissette's culinary palette has also had new experiences that include dog, snake and "quite a few things I don't even know what they were. There's a lot of mystery stuff better left unknown."

Since the age of 23, Mr. Dissette, who is now 48, has spent much of the past 25 Canadian winters backpacking through some of the most exotic and/or impoverished countries in the world.

"To date, Mr. Dissette has been to 103 of the planet's 180 countries.

"I was hoping to hit 100," Mr. Dissette said, surrounded by photo album after photo album documenting his adventures.

Mr. Dissette caught the travel bug early in life as his family often ventured to Ireland to vacation with relatives.

Shortly after high school, Mr. Dissette didn't know what he wanted to do with his life, so he applied for a job with the Hudson's Bay Company to work in Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories.

For the next 15 months, Mr. Dissette worked in the most northern regions of Canada with primarily native people.

Following his Northwest Territories stint, Mr. Dissette took a more southerly job, in Quetico Provincial Park near Thunder Bay, maintaining the wilderness park's portages.

"I pretty well used to live in a tent for six months and then I'd be able to travel around for six months," he said.

Because Mr. Dissette was familiar with Europe, it was where he went for his first solo adventure. But Mr. Dissette quickly found the Middle East and Third World countries to be far more interesting than the industrialized ones.

"The more I saw, the more ideas I got for seeing other things," he said. "You just talk to people and they tell you some crazy story about some place and you think 'wow, that sounds fantastic' and the next thing you know, you're planning to go there."

Mr. Dissette enjoys meeting people from all over the world while out trekking, but he's only ever purposefully travelled with someone else once, and that was earlier this year.

Even then, after a few weeks, the two went their separate ways.

"The guy I met up with last year, he's a fanatical traveller — he's in his 60s and he's been to 150 countries," Mr. Dissette said. "We keep in contact once in a while because I'm the one he figures will go to crazy places if he needs me for that."

But for the most part, Mr. Dissette wanders the world on his own, which suits him just fine.

"You're not tied down to somebody else and you can do your own thing," he said. "Depending where you're at you're always meeting people. If your interests are the same, you travel with them for a while and then it's time to split up."

However, the two months he spent alone in Madagascar was a bit much.

"That was a lonely time because I didn't speak French and it was cyclone season," he said. "I ran into one backpacker in two months; I was so happy to run into somebody I could talk to."

Some people, however, have put Mr. Dissette in precarious situations. Like the girl he met in Colombia who worked for the local cartel and got Mr. Dissette a job laundering money.

According to Mr. Dissette, he exchanged small bills from one type of currency to another. His take was one per cent of what he exchanged.

"It was interesting," he said. Until he made a mistake by referring to the currency he was trying to exchange by the wrong name. "I said the wrong thing (to the bank teller).

MONEY LAUNDERING, BAD OUTHOUSES

"I made \$50 a day and they can have you killed for \$50. (But) the guy I was working with liked me and told me he couldn't use me anymore (and I had) to get out of the country right away. So I left."

Travelling around the globe has not only taught Mr. Dissette how to be resourceful and to think quick on his feet to avoid trouble, but he's also learned that "we've got a lot more than what we need; we take it for granted."

Perhaps one of the things Mr. Dissette appreciates the most is indoor plumbing.

"When you go in there to the outhouse (in the Philippines) and before you even sit down, the pigs stick their heads up through the floor, so you have to throw rocks (at them) and go quick," he said.

Although Mr. Dissette has already embarked on one adventure so far this year, he's itching to go on another one in the next month or two before he heads back to work. When he spoke in late February, his destination was yet to be determined.

"Just whatever sounds kind of interesting," he said.

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