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Traveling Life's Great Road

Through her writing and photography, Nazima Kowall is sharing the various lifestyles and customs she witnessed on a fourteen-year journey. **By Robin Bower**

Photos by Jennifer Bowskill

Nazima Khatoun Ningtouri Ibrahim Kowall doesn't just write travel articles; she lives them. Perhaps that's what makes her work so vital. Primarily a photographer, Nazima can also add photojournalist, author, videographer, multimedia artist and explorer to her list of credentials. With over fourteen years' worth of stories from travels along the Silk Road, she has published articles and photographs in countless magazines both in Hong Kong and internationally.

A native of Sikkim, Nazima was at one time involved in public relations and in promoting the culture of her country. A small kingdom squashed between Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim was once part of Tibet but now lies within India's boundaries.

Nazima turned to photography after meeting her husband, Earl Kowall. A Canadian photographer, he was in Sikkim to photograph the third highest mountain in the world and was staying at her father's hotel. "Earl and I were fated to be together," says Kowall. "I became a photographer after he married me. He is a very good teacher. Whatever I learned is from him."

Her influential family was wary of foreigners, and the prospect of his daughter's marriage to one caused her father concern. After a long, complicated discourse about Earl's suitability, Nazima's father, the head of Islam in the kingdom, finally agreed to the marriage as long as Earl converted to Islam. So Earl, the Canadian Jew, and Nazima, the Moslem, were married with five thousand people in attendance over three days. A photo of their wedding shows both families in traditional Sikkim dress seemingly oblivious to the incongruity of the scene.

A stunning mix of Mongolian, Kazak, Tibetan and Chinese cultures, Nazima is tall and striking, and effusively animated. Her family heritage is very important to her. Nazima's grandfather was the catalyst for much of her traveling and for her writing, and it was from him that she heard tales of the Silk Road which he had traveled over a lifetime. Nazima's work centers around the mystique and history of the silk routes. This year, Random House (USA),

Hodder & Stoughton (UK) and Verlag Lubbe (Germany) are publishing *Daughter of the Great Silk Road* (with a foreword by the Dalai Lama) which tells the story of the fourteen-year search for Nazima's long-lost central Asian relatives. Nazima tells many captivating stories about the people and their long-observed customs. At Alay, near the extreme north of the Indian and former Soviet border, Nazima was kept prisoner for two days under suspicion of being a Russian agent. "They thought I was a spy...because no foreigners were allowed in the area," she says.

Tibetan, Hindi, Nepali, Urdu, Arabic and Bhutanese are six of the eight Indo-Asian languages Nazima speaks and reads. Her linguistic skills have enabled the Kowalls to travel to some of the most isolated places on earth. "I switch from one language to another and can read and write them all. Everyone thinks I am a native wherever we go," Nazima states.

Nazima's photographs are wanted for magazines, newspapers and coffee table books. "I am one of the Himalayan experts for *AsiaWeek*," she says. She has written and supplied photographs for books on Ladakh, Kashmir, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Darjeeling for The Guidebook Company in Hong Kong, and was a contributor to *Return to the Heart of the Dragon* for O&A Publishers.

CD-ROM is her newest venture which mixes still photography, moving pictures and commentary. Through photo and video vignettes, Nazima provides fantastic insight into living culture. She confidently appears on the other side of the video, first, holding the shortest man in the world, next as a spectator at a gruesome self-mutilating festival in Thailand. She has two versions of the CD-ROM — one censored and one uncensored as she willingly courts controversy over filming bizarre religious rituals and scenes of sexual diversity. "Life is bizarre and unbelievable at times. I want to show it all."

With videos and films, books, exhibitions and lectures, calendars, articles, interviews, television coverage and now CD-ROM, Nazima's talents are in high demand. After many years of travel on foot and by camel, what's next? "We're off to Canada for the quiet life — but I'll be taking my work with me." Perhaps she'll find some uncharted territory on her new road.



