

# Spiritual journeys among the Kiwi dags



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## TELEVIEW

**W**E ASK travellers "So — how do you like New Zealand?" as they take their bags down from the luggage rack. Yep, we're an unappealing needy little bunch, wanting no more than to be told we live in the best place in the world. How would Alain Botton analyse this? Were we mocked when we were little, with the "I'll show you" reaction yet to set in? Or were we over-coddled, told again and again that this is God's little acre, and we just need our cleverness for living here acknowledged? Is New Zealand a BMW or a Japanese import? A Rolex or a free with the cereal digital watch?

So, who could resist watching *Behaviours of the Backpacker* (TV1, Saturday, 2.30pm), and what a damn shame it wasn't on in prime time.

Sandor Lau is a nicely self-deprecating Asian American who came here three years ago on a Fulbright scholarship and has stayed. Gosh, this could mean he likes us. Auckland has been home and quite frankly, he's not very struck on cities. Within minutes of the camera rolling, we get a clear idea of what he thinks of big business, globalisation, oil companies and retail therapy.

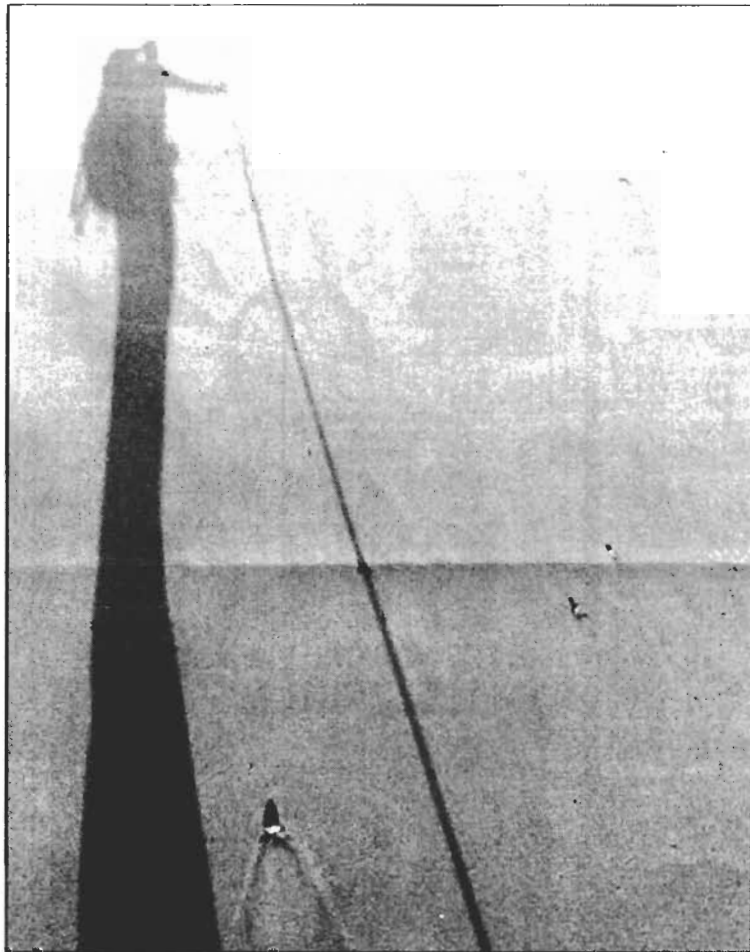
So his walk from Auckland to Cape Reinga — where, he's been told that the spirit leaves the body after death — is a bit of a spiritual quest.

After just a few minutes of watching the Kiwi dags whose occupation of choice is the tourism industry, it was clear that not only are we a Japanese import but we're one of the dodgy ones that should have been recalled years ago.

"Baz and I got along so well that he invited me to stay with him," chirps Sandor somewhat dolefully, cutting to Baz, who tells a longwinded story about another group of backpackers who stayed with him. He took them eeling (chuckle), then he ate a live freshwater cray (chortle), then he made them eat one (guffaw) and they spewed up (ha), so he called in his dog and the dog ate the spew (snigger) and when they saw that, they went outside and spewed up some more (belly laugh).

Who knows where else these tourists had been, poor sods, because they told good old Baz when they left the next day that this was the BEST time they'd had in New Zealand.

Then he tells Landor — whose four grand-



**No walk in the park:** *Behaviours of the Backpacker* sees Asian American film-maker Sandor Lau film his journey from Auckland to Cape Reinga, interviewing other tourists along the way.

parents left Communist China and Hungary respectively to settle in America, and whose offspring renounced all to live as hippies, doing everything organically, the hard way — that he's been looking for a Chinaman to have with his puha.

Then there's Peter, who's Dutch, of a certain age, who runs a backpackers'. He can speak loads of languages but self-deprecating isn't in his vocab in any of them. He's amazed at how many Japanese without any English language skills travel. This gives him the opportunity to show us he can speak some Japanese.

"I greet them in Japanese and they reply in English, so I say to them, 'What? Can't you speak Japanese?'" he says, laughing to distract from the fact that what he has just said is totally illogical. Then he's off on his next story, which is about how when people from Israel come, he greets them in Hebrew, and they say, and he says . . .

Richard, who's French, ponders how travel is meant to broaden the mind but unfortunately, it's just made him more intolerant. Other tourists can be the worst. In Thailand, for example, he's watched them eating burgers and drinking Coke and walking the streets making so much noise, and looking for prostitutes. Then it's cut to a young Isra-

li of exquisite tragic beauty, doped to the eyeballs. "What do you believe in?" asks Landor. "Me," he says with spaced-out honesty.

Faced with such full-on self-absorption, all you can feel is — well — old. People who travel — as opposed to tourists — form a nation of their own. A few of them even glance up occasionally from their own navels. There's Lorna from Scotland, a calmly spoken pragmatist who came out here in 1995 and fell in love with both the country and a New Zealander. She was obliged to return to Scotland and got used to loving people on the other side of the world. She finally made it back here, but only after the man she loved had died from leukemia.

And as proof that we might be a BMW after all, there was weaver Te Hemoata Henare, who says she could never exhibit her work as an individual — a whole lot of people contribute to every basket she makes.

Nearly at Cape Reinga, Sandor acknowledges that all this self-discovery can start to feel like self-abuse. Then he's made it to the top and, well, he feels like it's home. And grateful that someone of his talent should want to be here, even down here at the other end of the island, we're damned happy to have him.