

Why smoking is bad for you

BY SANDOR LAU

WELL, IT DOESN'T HAVE HAMMOCKS or beanbags. And they don't make you breakfast with cinnamon toast. But for 15 bucks a night it's not bad. The real kicker, though, is when I find out that anyone caught smoking here gets their ass tossed out on the street. That's when I decide I'll be staying a few days.

No, I don't mind the bunk room. If I had the cash, and if I wanted to go to the Ritz, I'd go there. And sit alone in the dark watching the greatest Hollywood high school comedies of 1985-87 until dawn and wake up in a puddle of drool then spend my day dutifully visiting museums and other institutions of cultural heritage. But this is New Zealand, and even they are ashamed of their cultural heritage. Which, I suppose, is all the more reason to take interest.

Anyway, that's not what I'm here for. I came to the Moa Hunter smokefree backpackers hostel for a reason:

- Because Jesus told me to look for the Holy Grail in the Southern Alps.

- Because I am a social anthropologist researching mating behaviours of transient trustafarians in their natural habitat.

- Because I'm climbing Mt Cook in preparation for Everest.

- Because my yacht's rudder broke in a cyclone off Vanuatu, and three days later I washed up here in Godzone.

Because you walk into a backpackers with 30 strangers and you're forced to answer the same old where-are-you-from-and-what-do-you-do-and-why-are-you-here? as anywhere else, but you can be whoever you want. It's like going to the bank and taking out a loan and they can't ask for collateral.

I carry my backpack through the mouth of the ochre-stained gateway, carved with pointy tongues and abalone eyes, and up the seashell pathway past the life-sized stucco and chicken-wire moa, and come to the doorway. There's a picture of Humphrey Bogart with burning cigarettes jammed in his nostrils, ears, eyes and down his throat, and he says "Here's lookin' at you kid."

Right next to the sign, and I mean practically leaning against it, some

fucker in his Che Guevara T-shirt and Nike sweatshop trainers is smoking. And I think he would look perfect dressed up like Humphrey Bogart in the picture. But I've been on edge ever since, well, never mind. I'd rather not talk about it.

The bunkroom has yellow sheets and a red Chinese lantern over the bulb, which seems scandalous enough, but the only two people in the room are reading. And I think, wow, that's great, because you really need to jump on a plane to the furthest reaches of the South Pacific to do that, but then you could say the same for museums or emptying bottles of rotten grapes. I've already seen the museum, so I think I'll tend to the grapes.

Here's the great thing about backpackers: I walk in and dump my stuff - I have a bottle of rotten grapes with me already, and I barely have a chance to sit down before I meet Lucky. I think this guy's Australian, and I think he's here for some surfing thing, or running from the law, can't be sure, but he's doing a fine job helping me with the grapes, and when we say our good-byes tomorrow morning or Tuesday or in an hour, we'll exchange addresses and pretend we're going to write each other. And of course we won't, but I'll never need to know what a bastard he is, and he won't need to see what an asshole I am, and we'll just remember a few stories and a few laughs.

A talented bullshitter can always sniff out someone vulnerable to bullshit. I think Lucky smelled me from Queensland. Having been vulnerable to it all my life, I can always smell the bullshit, and I think I smelled him all the way from Colorado. I just can't let him know I know, because then he'll stop, and I'll miss out on a good story.

When Lucky starts spouting off about all the business that's gone on in his sleeping bag the two months he's been here, I don't ask him why he needs to bolster his ego. I ask for details.

A few weeks ago he spent a special night with *of course I love you what was your name?* and in the morning they said their goodbyes and pretended they would write each other. Three

days later in another backpackers in another town, he's chatting up someone else in the lounge, and who walks in but *of course I love you what was your name?* and she's got a letter for him and she delivers it personally. You wouldn't think the corner of an envelope could cause that much damage, but I can still see the scab and it looks infected.

After getting this much out of him, I'm not ready for storytime to end, but he's got a bit of a sore throat and throws out a cough. Rotten grapes work both as a thirst quencher and a lubricant, and I sense it's time to get this man to the bar for more lubrication. I don't know Lucky that well yet. I'm pretty sure he's Australian now, and I think all that about surfing and running from the law is his version of Mt Cook and the yacht, but I know enough to know he's not a man who turns down fermented invitations.

I really should have spotted that bulge in his pocket before. Fucking telltale sign. And I should not be surprised when he whips it out, a skinny bent one. But before he can light it, my eyes glow green, sparks shoot from my nostrils and fangs grow from my cuspids, and he sort of gets the idea that maybe I'm not so keen on the whole smoking thing.

What a superstar, though, because he puts it away. And tells me that smokes, too, are a lubricant. Then he asks me if I think he has no morals. I ask him if I look like I go to Sunday school. He tells me I'm right. He has no morals whatsoever.

No morals but one, and only recently discovered at that. He walks into this back-to-the-earth backpackers that has geothermal heating and a compost bin and where they teach you to weave your own clothes and where you can work on the farm to earn some food. And it's not even so bad that they're crazy-for-Jesus, because they sing nice songs to wake you up in the morning, rather than letting you wallow in your hangover. Besides, Lucky has always enjoyed the challenge of Christian girls and their morals.

So she's sitting in the chapel smoking

LISTENER APRIL 20 2002

away like a campfire, and the bars of sunlight on her through the stained glass make her look like an angel. With a smoke-ring halo. He comes to kneel beside her at the pew and before he can ask if she wants a light, she sparks up a new one off the old one and he has to watch not to disturb the mountain of sacrificial butts and ashes she has collected before her as a holocaust.

He doesn't even have to lay much on her before it's confession time and soon she's telling him about how she planned this trip here with her boyfriend and they were thinking of getting married and they had such a marvellous time together that now she's chainsmoking in a chapel and crying on the shoulder of some random Australian.

He tells me – and I'm scraping the flesh off my hands under the table now – how beautiful her shoulder is when she cries and how the little bells on the cuffs of her shirt jingle. She tells him about her fight with her boyfriend over smoking and Jesus-worship and over Jean-Michel in France.

Despite the lack of a single thread of moral fibre in all his being, Lucky cannot bring himself to strike when the time seems most right. I stop tearing my flesh under the table but I don't much feel like storytime any more. I feel like about four and a half beers, and Lucky, though I don't know him that well yet, does not seem like he would let himself fall behind. He doesn't.

After five more beers I gain the clarity of vision to see what a good guy he is. Not someone who would take advantage of a foreigner with a smoke-ring halo and jingly-jangly bells on her shirt making an offering to Our Lady of the Broken Hearts. He asks me if I can imagine how it would be, cut loose like that, a bazillion miles from home and I tell him I'm the 13th disciple and a doctor of anthropology and a mountain climber and a yacht captain and my heart goes out to her, but I'm happy I've never had to deal with that kind of pain in my life. He tells me he's a surfer and he's running from the law and we laugh and stumble back to the Moa Hunter with our



arms around each other's shoulders.

At three in the morning I wouldn't be pleased if a couple of larrikins stumbled into the room singing "Waltzing Matilda", and I guess our fellow guests in the big bunkroom are not especially pleased with us. But when another couple waltzes in about a half-hour later, they're not really fazed. No one protests when they bump into things in the dark and giggle naughtily at each other, or when the puffy-glow paint of his Che Guevara T-shirt nearly blinds them with its

gaudiness. Or when the bells on her cuffs jingle-jangle.

Even when their bed rocks and rolls, just a few feet of darkness away from what used to be a room full of people trying to sleep, no one seems to mind much and most enjoy it or ignore it. But what really gets me is that right afterwards they light up a pair of smokes. I could always smell her bullshit when she talked about quitting. So I start to pack my bag because I'll sleep on the street if it comes to that, just so I don't have to see her in the morning. ■