

For review only

RODNEY EE

KNEE HOW?

Marshall Cavendish
Editions



KNEE HOW?

The Further Misadventures of
a Globe-Trotting Singaporean



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Illustrations by Hervé Cotton

Travel addict Rodney Ee, the author of *My Name is Not Konnichiwa — the Misadventures of a Globe-Trotting Singaporean*, returns with a brand new collection of interesting travel stories and experiences.

The world has changed dramatically in the 8 years since the book was published and right up until the Covid-19 pandemic began to cripple global air travel, he was still journeying to destinations near and far, in a bid to satisfy his wanderlust. This collection of 20 pieces cover travel experiences from bull-fights and safaris, to unique spa sessions and fiery festivals. The stories reflect his keen observation of human nature and his ability to spin stories that are both humorous and entertaining.



During the last few years, the Chinese diaspora has continued to scatter to all corners of the globe, and before the pandemic, the Chinese tourist dollar was an extremely coveted commodity. Recently, on his travels, Rodney had increasingly been mistaken as a citizen of China, which does not bother him at all. But what seems to pique his curiosity, is why he keeps getting questions about the condition of his knee.

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CONTENTS

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Acknowledgments	7
Introduction	9
 Prologue	
Knee How?	13
 Technology Dinosaur	
Beware Of The Bidet	17
Before Google Maps	23
 Insane In The Membrane	
Run! Run! Run!	33
Shin Pads Not Included	41
What A Load Of Bull!	47
Have Siren Will Travel	53
 The Meaning Of Life	
Filipino Time	61
Why Did The Wildebeest Cross The River?	71

For review only

Worst Case Scenarios

The Toilet Inspector	79
Rain Rain Go Away	87
Of Mouse and Man	93
The Day I Flashed Florence	97
Try The Miso Soup	101
Recipe For Steamed Marinated Chicken	111

The Global Smorgasbord

A Meal To Die For	119
Do You Want Flies With That?	125

Say Cheese

The Chinese Photography Factory	131
A Festival For Everyone	141

Human Geography

Obscene Village Names For 200	151
The Elephant In The Room	155

Epilogue

Silver Linings	161
About The Author	167

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INTRODUCTION

It was April in the year 2013. In a savvy French café named Cordon Bleu along Thomson Road, a little-known writer invited an audience of family and friends to join him for a small event. The ambience was cosy, with some of the writer's photos adorning the walls of the café, and the food was *magnifique* – compliments of the very talented *Monsieur* and *Madame* Herve Cotton.

After more than ten years of collecting stories and travel experiences, two years of hammering away at keyboards, enduring countless hours of writer's block, and many more months of cornea-damaging proofreading; rewriting of several paragraphs (and sometimes whole chapters); haggling (and begging) with editors to save some lines, and running after the cartoonist for completed sketches, the book was finally launched to some fanfare. It was mission accomplished, a dream fulfilled, and a time for *carpe diem*.

The writer signs a couple of books at the event for some fawning fans (or so he imagines), and then comes face-to-face with an old friend. He picks up the book, looks at its cover, skims through the pages quickly, read a couple of lines, and then, in one fell swoop, proceeds to throw the writer off the face of a steep cliff. "Nice book, when's the next one?"

The world has moved on since that fateful day. Great men and women have gone to meet their maker, global markets have continued on a rollercoaster ride, and Singapore's soccer team is no closer to qualifying for the World Cup. Political correctness has been booted out the door, the tension between globalisation and nationalisation has never been higher, and the route to the presidency is now through your twitter account.

Global pollution levels remain high, and leaders are turning a blind eye. Global warming is on the rise, and with the heat, so too the number of times I need to shower every day. The fresh water needs of the global population are also rising, in tandem with global sea levels, which threaten to wipe out tiny island states. In a few years, my honeymoon location might be under water, and we would need to scuba-dive to make a romantic return. Species extinction rates are accelerating, yet dodos and morons are proliferating.

The only constant in all this is change, and the only certainty is taxes and death, plus the fact that I always seem to need to take a dump in toilets that were last cleaned at the end of the last millennium. Free Wi-Fi is everywhere, and the most important travel accessory is no longer your passport, but the selfie stick. Instant gratification on social media is on the rise, and TikTok is no longer just the sound that your clock makes, but the latest must-have platform for promoting yourself and your products.

Not long after the book launch, I moved on to a new job, but my voracious appetite for travel meant scooting off on airplanes whenever I could find some time, even if it was just for a few days. Trying to juggle the desire to document these experiences with the demands of the new role, has been like trying to maintain adulterous relationships with two insanely jealous mistresses, whilst trying to keep the affairs private from my long-suffering wife Michelle. At times, it has been a challenge to find the energy and the inspiration after long days at work, extended periods of procrastination, and endless hours of distractions on Netflix. So, if I should see you at the launch of this new labour of love, please do me a favour – do *not* ask me there and then, when the next book will be.

Warning...I bite.

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PROLOGUE

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KNEE How?

Sometime during the late 1980s, when big hair and shoulder pads ruled the fashion world, a seventeen-year old walked around the cobblestoned streets of London with his college mates, on his maiden trip to the country that gave him Queens Elizabeth and Mercury. He took in the sights of landmarks he had come to know from watching television and reading books, and listening to broadcasts from the BBC World Service. He visited the great museums and the flea markets, and bought memorabilia of his favourite soccer team. He navigated the complexities of the London Tube, and ate fish and chips at Picadilly. He also came to appreciate the theatre of the West End, and reeled in shock and horror, when fellow Singaporean Glen Goei did a full monty onstage, opposite Sir Anthony Hopkins in David Henry Hwang's iconic *M. Butterfly*.

Most of all, he began to understand what it was like to have black hair and "yellow" skin, and walk around in a foreign country and be shouted at: "Go back to China, you chink!"

Somehow, when I look back on that fateful day, I do not recall feeling any anger or resentment over the racist jibe. Notwithstanding the fact that whoever yelled it was a first-class

For review only

moron and a second class racist, I am after all, a descendant of a China man. My nurture has taught me to speak differently, to think differently, and pledge my loyalty to another country, but I am, at the end of the day, ethnically Chinese. Of late, whenever I did travel to China, it felt, somewhat nostalgically, like I was going “back” to China. Don’t get me wrong – I love my country, and I am as proud a Singaporean as one can be (except when I’m trying to haggle for discount, or when I do something really embarrassing). But as I grow older, I find myself becoming more curious about why my ancestors made the arduous and dangerous journey across the South China Sea; where they lived before they decided to emigrate; and if I have any long-lost cousins and family still living in China.

Presently, the Chinese diaspora has emigrated to all four corners of the earth, with large overseas Chinese populations even in countries like Ghana, Peru and Kazakhstan. I also experienced a culture shock when I visited the small Pacific Island country of Vanuatu, and observed that all the provision shops and supermarkets were owned and operated by Chinese. The Chinese communist planned economy of the past has given way to market driven capitalism, and the Chinese are among the biggest investors in the world, driving global investments in mammoth strategic infrastructure projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Even Hollywood is not spared, and a significant number of Hollywood movies now have opening sequences with Chinese production logos, and increasingly feature a token actor or actress from China.

The Chinese now have the highest purchasing power parity in the world, even higher than the United States, and almost a fifth of all world spending on tourism are attributed to the Chinese. Walk into Gucci, Prada, Hermes, Louis Vuitton, or any other designer boutique anywhere in the world, and there

will be a Chinese salesperson, or someone to assist you to spend your money in fluent Mandarin. Increasingly, public transport announcements around the world are also made in Mandarin, and signs in airports and other public areas include Chinese words and translations.

More than ever before, the Chinese are everywhere, and of late when I travel I am more commonly mistaken as a Chinese citizen by people overseas, as opposed to any other Asian identity. That’s all fine and dandy with me, but why do they keep asking me about the condition of my knee?



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THE GLOBAL **SMORGASBORD**

A **MEAL** TO **DIE** FOR

Seafood markets are fascinating.

I just love that these markets are such an assault on the senses. I love the smell of the ocean that hits you even before you walk into the buildings. I love it when I see fish with bulging eyes and still-breathing gills, lying on their beds of ice, their bodies glistening under the bright white glow of fluorescent lights. I love how the black prickly shells of the sea urchins open up to reveal the rich gold colours of their heavenly roe. I love it when the cold steel blade of a sword slices through a 200-pound bluefin tuna with effortless ease, revealing the different layers of meat from dull to deep blood red.

I love the splish-splashing sounds of water on the floors and in the tanks, the grating sounds of fish being de-scaled, and the raised voices of the auctioneers as they try to get the highest prices for the day. I love picking up a bunch of still wriggling razor clams, holding up an Alaskan King Crab by its claws, and feeling the rubbery skin of a monkfish, as you inspect them before agreeing to the price.

But most of all, I love the thought that in just a matter of minutes, all that I see in front of me, could be in my belly.

For review only

There's nothing fresher and more delicious than choosing what you want to eat at the market, and then having it cooked to your liking almost immediately. Although you can also get live and fresh seafood at some restaurants in the city or at tourist hotspots, they usually don't have the range and variety of fish, molluscs and crustaceans that the plethora of stalls in the markets will have, and they are usually more expensive.

My first experience of having an amazing seafood meal in a market was at Nan-Fang-Ao Fish Market in Taiwan, which had restaurants right inside the market, that take whatever you have bought and whip up a storm of seafood. Years later, on a visit to the now-defunct Tsukiji market in Tokyo, my family and I queued for more than an hour in the early hours of the morning, for some unbelievably fresh sushi at a restaurant within the market premises.

Fast forward to 2014, and we found ourselves on the Gyeongbu Subway Line 1 headed to the Noryangjin metro station to visit the Noryangjin Fisheries Wholesale Market. We had researched about the market through social media blogs and vlogs, and we knew we couldn't afford to pass up the chance to go there. Spread out over a whopping 6,000 square feet of real estate¹, the market has close to 700 stalls selling all the best tastes that the ocean has to offer. If Tsukiji (now Toyosu) in Tokyo was the king of all seafood markets in the world, we were sure Noryangjin was certainly part of the royal family too.

When we arrived at the station, we made our way to the entrance of the building, and came to a parapet overlooking some of the stalls. Just from that view alone, I went to seafood heaven, heard the choir in my head sing Handel's *Messiah Hallelujah Chorus*, and knew that the visit was going to end in smiles, lots and lots of big smiles. The market was indeed vast,

¹ Like Tsukiji, the Noryangjin Market has also moved since I was there, albeit just next door to an adjacent building.



and most of the stalls had tanks with seafood inside that were very much alive and kicking, and in some cases, squirting!

As we walked around, we knew we had to select the food for our lunch, but we did not have the foggiest idea which stall to choose from. Being first-timers there, we were trying our level best to look confident and not give the look that screamed “cheat me!”. There were just so many choices it was driving us mad. There were clams, oysters, shrimp, lobsters, fish, crayfish and so many other varieties of seafood it was mind-boggling. I was also hallucinating that the crabs were holding signs above their shells that read, “Hey you! Eat me!”

Everything looked so potentially delicious it was tempting not to overspend and order too much food. Everything, except maybe Gaebul, a species of marine spoon worm affectionately nicknamed the penis fish – a sea creature truly endowed with the size, the shape, and some say, even the feel, of the male genitalia. As we walked around, some of the stallholders were holding the creatures and squeezing their heads to make them squirt, and laughing at the startled reactions of some tourists. Apparently, Gaebul is supposedly not just delicious, but has some aphrodisiac qualities, thus proving once again, that God really does have a sense of humour.

We finally settled on a stall and bought ourselves a plump king crab, some live abalone, some fresh-cut sashimi, and summoning our courage, one sannakji (live octopus) – something we had thought about trying since we first viewed a vlogger sampling some of it. Our stallholder was also kind enough to recommend a restaurant upstairs, which probably belonged to one of his relatives, if not his wife! We thanked him, paid up, and made our way to the restaurant.

First out from the kitchen was the sashimi, which lasted all but two minutes on the table. Then came the sannakji, lightly

coated with some sesame oil and seeds. It was chopped up into smaller pieces – very much dead, but at the same time, still very much “alive”. Like something out of a Zombie apocalyptic movie, each tentacle was not just twitching – it was curling, moving and gripping around as if looking to reunite with its head and other parts. As I tried to put one tentacle into my mouth, part of it seized on my lip and tried to go up my nostril. Not wanting the additional ingredients and seasoning from my boogers, I managed to pry it off and put it into my mouth, making sure I chewed quickly and thoroughly to prevent it sticking onto my gums or tongue, and from going on an extended tour of my esophagus. When you are young you are always told not to play with your food, but what if the food wants to play with you?

Thankfully the only movement from the rest of the meal came from the rising steam from the pots and plates. The abalone was super crunchy, the crab legs were divine, and when the cook brought back the crab shell and cooked fried rice with all its guts, we went to heaven and back.

Years later, I came across an article that reported that at least six people die of choking due to consumption of sannakji every year. Whilst ours was cut up into smaller pieces that made the chewing and swallowing safer and easier, diners with a death wish eat the octopus whole, either by skewering the octopus and wrapping its tentacles tightly like a chocolate roll (and then putting the whole thing into their mouths), or by just lifting it by the head and digging into the tentacles one by one. This makes eating sannakji, quite literally, a meal to die for, or if you are eating it later in the evening... very likely, the last supper.

Given the dangers and the number of fatalities already attributed with this dish – why were there no warning labels?

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ABOUT THE **AUTHOR**

Rodney is a logistics executive, a freelance travel writer and an avid amateur photographer with a passion for travel photography. He is the author of *My Name is Not Konnichiwa – The Misadventures of a Globe-Trotting Singaporean* (2013). He has made frequent contributions to *The Straits Times* Travel section, and his photos have also been published in several online platforms such as National Geographic Yourshot, Nikon Asia, Wikimedia Commons, and in print with Fodors Guidebooks.

He has travelled extensively around the world for work and leisure, but is always happy to return back to his home in Singapore – to his family, his humble abode, and to the country's myriad of culinary delights. He first felt a deep sense of wanderlust whilst studying in the university and got his “wings” when he began his career as a marketing executive with Singapore Airlines, back in the days when dinosaurs roamed the earth and policemen wore shorts.

He is happily married and is looking forward to more adventures with his long-suffering wife.