

## **A Ugandan Asian's eviction by Idi Amin sparks a life of wandering, wondering and trying to help others on four continents**

Mo Tejani is a fun-loving free spirit who's been to the summit of Kilimanjaro and the depths of the Grand Canyon, explored Central American jungles and served happily as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand. Yet his life was torn in two by tragedy when he was 21.

In 1972, he was one of 80,000 Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin. Uganda was the only home he'd ever known.

His family was scattered all over the globe. After two unhappy years at an English university, he was off on a scholarship to Albion College in Michigan and, as he says, he never looked back.

This book is subtitled "True Stories of a Global Refugee". In addition to being a polyglot – Gujarati, Hindi, English, Swahili, Spanish and Thai – he's been mistaken for a Mexican, an American Indian and a Thai-Indian tailor. He passes through many worlds easily, yet at his core there abides an anger and bitterness at suddenly losing his home and family.

Idi Amin gave him 90 days to get out of town.

In March 1979, he arrived in Thailand as a freshly minted American citizen and Peace Corps volunteer, eventually assigned to Phuket Teachers' College. In his second year he was transferred to Chiang Rai Teachers' College. Talk about the best of both worlds!

Like most returning volunteers, he was bored back in the States and jumped at the chance to work at Phanat Nikhom Refugee Processing Centre, a sea of bamboo huts set up to house 17,000 Vietnamese and Cambodians bound for the US.

Then he was off to teach Indonesians to teach English to Vietnamese.

In 1998 he travelled around Vietnam, bumping up against some severe political contradictions. Returned Vietnamese are regarded as "traitors", while Ho Chi Minh is adored at his mausoleum in Hanoi.

"Here was the man who masterminded the defeat of the American war machine... I clasped my hands together in a traditional wai to the great chameleon who had changed the course of modern history in Asia. Next to me, I noticed Hoi [a Vietnamese returning from Switzerland] whispering to Uncle Ho as if in confession, as if atoning for her sins."

This is a bit much. You'd think there'd be some mention of what drove all those boat people out of Vietnam in the first place.

But, with a few exceptions, Mo Tejani is no preacher of PC platitudes. He's more interested in the people he meets and his many friends and lovers. A third of the way through his book, he circles back to his pre-Thailand days: the heartbreaking tale of his childhood in Africa, the exuberant comedy of his hippie days on a beach in California, and the rip-roaring adventure of backpacking from Mexico to Argentina.

Stuck in a rainstorm among Mayan ruins, he meets Maya, a flute-playing Huichol Indian.

They jam for an hour on flute and congas.

"When the rain finally stopped, he took me over to a backpacker campsite to meet up with a Texan hippie guitarist, Carlton, who was driving his VW van around Mexico with a group of traveller musicians he had picked up on the road. Besides Maya, there was Japanese Kiko, crew-cut hair dyed blond, who jammed on his portable Hammond organ; German brunette Uta, on summer break from university in Tübingen, who carried the beat with her maracas and hand cymbals, and red-haired Danny from Winnipeg, Canada, piping in with his alto saxophone."

The ragtag band plays in village squares throughout Yucatan, accepting meals of tacos and enchiladas.

When they break up, Mo and Uta, lovers now, embark on a week-long foray into the jungle along the Guatemalan border. When Uta flies back to Germany, Mo is off to Belize and the town of Punta Gorda, home of the Garifunas, descendants of deported black Carib slaves. He arrives just in time for their annual festival, curious about their music.

Invoking Bob Marley and his "awareness of social issue", once again he tugs his forelock to political convention with this clunker of a sentence: "Maybe Garifuna music would add another dimension to the search for music being used as a weapon of change for the underprivileged."

But what he finds is a kick-ass good time, drunk on pineapple wine and dancing with his new lover, "sensuous, ebony-skinned Rose, who had buttocks bigger than some of the Ugandan women".

Three-fifths through the book, he returns to where he had left us. With his Filipina girlfriend Corazon, a co-worker on Galang, he'd travelled to check out a job in Pakistan, but in the airport on the way back made the mistake of poking his head into the women's waiting room and barely escaped decapitation by "a dark-skinned Muslim with a bushy black beard".

Now back in the States, he gains a scholarship in international studies at Ohio University. When he graduates in 1985, it's his ticket for two decades of NGO and Peace Corps work.

In a chapter called "Robbing the Poor", he is scathing about the first NGO he works for in Khon Kaen. Calling it "Children Incorporated (CI)", he finds the higher-ups more interested in fund-raising than facts on the ground. Two years later he's transferred to Guatemala and spends the next decade in Central America. Fed up with local CI corruption, he takes a five-year Peace Corps staff job in Honduras.

He offers a thoughtful analysis contrasting the idealism of his young volunteers with the brutal ineptness of their government.

There's a chapter devoted to the many loves of his life in Uganda, London, Michigan, California, Mexico, Peru, Thailand and, most of all, Corazon in the Philippines, who breaks his heart.

The book ends with a moving emotional return to Uganda with his nephew in 1997.

Mo Tejani lives in Chiang Mai now and is still single. Two photos show him striking the same pose: a thin young man with flowing locks and Pancho Villa moustache, and a balding 55-year-old with a trim white beard. The smile is still the same.